



MENOPAUSE: IT REALLY IS A “CHANGE”

At first blush, **menopause** may not sound like a topic for a magazine about making a **good appearance**. But stop and think: In the first place, **if you're bloated** and retaining water, you're **flushed red** all over, **your fingernails are breaking**, and you've **gained weight**, all of which are among the symptoms of menopause, you certainly **aren't looking your best**. And in addition, if you're experiencing **discomforting physical conditions** and **mood swings**, you're not going to be in a good place in your own head...and you **won't project the glowing, attractive personality** you want people to see.

So, you see, there **definitely is an appearance factor to menopause**. Perhaps that explains why so many readers have asked us to address this subject. In fact, it is probably the single most requested topic we have heard about from our readers.

BY DR. EVAN SHAPIRO

The signs and symptoms of perimenopause and menopause can vary from woman to woman, with some symptoms being more common than others

Colloquially known as “change of life,” or “the change,” menopause is the phase of a woman's life when she has no further menstrual periods. The symptoms that may be associated with menopause, however, can go far beyond simply no longer getting your period and may really present a big change indeed for the average woman.

Menopause is a condition diagnosed retrospectively: The diagnosis is made after a woman has been without a period for one year. The average age of menopause is 51.4 years of age, but no one can tell an individual woman when menopause will begin for her.

Perimenopause occurs before the menopause and is defined as the time between having normal menstrual periods and having no pe-

riods at all. The perimenopausal period usually lasts for five to seven years but can last as long as ten years. During the perimenopausal phase, a woman may experience a combination of premenstrual syndrome (PMS) and menopausal symptoms...or no symptoms at all. PMS is much more common in the 30s and 40s and mimics some of the changes in the perimenopause.

The signs and symptoms of perimenopause and menopause can vary from woman to woman, with some symptoms being more common than others. See the box for some of the more common ones.

A human female is born with all the eggs in her ovaries that she will ever produce in her lifetime. Over time, there is a steady reduction in the number of eggs remaining, as an egg (usually just one) is released each month. By the time most women are in their late 40s, the number of eggs remaining in the ovaries is very low. Follicle stimulating hormone (FSH) is the main hormone involved in stimulating the production of mature eggs. However, the remaining eggs are not able to respond to FSH as they did years earlier.

This results in the ovaries failing to release eggs and a greatly reduced production of estrogen and progesterone, associated with an increase in FSH. Then, the periods become irregular and unpredictable until they stop totally, since estrogen and progesterone control the menstrual cycle.

About two out of every three women experience hot flashes or flushes during perimenopause and menopause. A hot flash is a sensation of heat, usually of short duration, that can be associated with a red, flushed face and sweating. The cause of hot flashes is not known but may be related to changes in circulation.

During a hot flash, the blood vessels near the skin's surface dilate to cool, and this produces the redness and flushing of the face. Some women may also experience a rapid heart rate or chills or have an increase in sweating to cool down the body.

One of the most common disturbances for women entering perimenopause or menopause is unexplained weight gain, especially around the waist and hips. Despite attempting to diet, it is very difficult to lose the weight. The mechanism for this weight gain is also related to the decrease in estrogen and its effect on women's body fat cells trying to maintain the hormonal balance.

There is no need to suffer from these uncomfortable physical sensations, or from the emotional reaction that can occur when you feel that you are less attractive because of bloating, weight gain, or other symptoms. Menopause is a time of change: No more periods and no more concerns about an unwanted pregnancy, either. Rejoice and enjoy it, and let that enjoyment add to your inner glow.

If you have any of the symptoms listed in the sidebar, or you have any questions about menopause, contact your physician. When deciding whether or not to use any of the treatment options, you and your doctor need to talk about the potential benefits and risks of each option. Remember to inform your physician of any medications or supplements you are already taking.

Treatment options include hormonal replacement, “natural” treatments, supplements, exercise, and dietary changes. Since there are so many potential symptoms associated with menopause and perimenopause, the treatment should be individualized for each person.

IMAGE

COMMON SYMPTOMS		
• Unpredictable and irregular periods	• Sweaty, clammy feeling	balance
• Shorter and lighter periods	• Sleeplessness	• Changes in body/breath odor
• Heavier periods	• Dry vagina	• Gum problems with increased bleeding
• Shorter cycles	• Decrease in or loss of libido	• Gastrointestinal distress, flatulence, indigestion, nausea
• Longer cycles	• Memory loss	• Bloating
• Heart palpitations or irregular heartbeat	• Difficulty in concentrating	• Increase in allergies
• Mood swings	• Mental confusion and disorientation	• Burning tongue, roof of mouth, and bad taste in mouth
• Irritability	• Aching, sore joints/muscles	• Tinnitus (ringing in ears), bells, “whooshing,” buzzing
• Sudden tears	• Headaches	• Fingernails that become softer, break and crack more easily.
• Fatigue	• Itchy, crawly skin	
• Depression	• Incontinence, especially upon laughing or sneezing	
• Weight gain	• Breast tenderness	
• Anxiety	• Hair loss or thinning	
• Hot flashes, night sweats, and/or cold flashes	• Vertigo, light-headedness, or episodes of losing your	