

Menopause



You may wish to share this leaflet with family and friends. The menopause is the time in every woman's life when her ovaries stop producing the hormones that control her periods. The average age in the UK for this to happen is 51 (or 50 for smokers). Irregular and heavier bleeding becomes more common in the decade leading up to the menopause and this time is sometimes called the "climacteric".

Confirming the diagnosis of the menopause is not possible until it has happened and in general blood tests are not helpful.

Common symptoms include: hot flushes, night sweats, tiredness and lethargy, mood swings (including depression), joint pains, itchy skin, decreased sex drive (libido) and vaginal dryness.

In addition a woman's bones thin out rapidly in the first five years after the menopause, and this may leave her more susceptible in later life to fractures, especially of the wrist and hip. Women are more likely to develop heart disease after the menopause and there is some evidence that Alzheimer's disease may worsen with falling hormone levels.

Women's experience of the menopause differs but there are a number of things you can do to help yourself:

- Exercise – 30 minutes of regular exercise 3 times a week will help to control weight, prevent heart disease and decrease the risk of osteoporosis. Walking, running or dancing is best for healthy bones. Start gently and gradually increase your activity and remember 3 ten-minute sessions each day counts as 30 minutes exercise.
- Diet – a diet rich in calcium & vitamin D, such as dairy products, green vegetables and bony fish help prevent

osteoporosis. Reduced salt and saturated fats helps prevent heart disease and fruit and vegetables help general health and prevent constipation.

- Alcohol & caffeine – can make flushes and urinary symptoms worse so take only in moderation.
- Smoking – increases greatly the risk of heart disease and osteoporosis and it ages the skin quicker. Help from the practice nurse in giving up smoking is available including nicotine replacement treatment, so why not stop now!
- Weight – after the menopause there is a tendency to put weight on around your middle, so regular exercise and a healthy diet helps.
- Sex – vaginal dryness can make intercourse painful so the use of a lubricant such as KY Jelly may help. Contraception is necessary until a year after your last period if you are over 50 or 2 years if you are younger. **HRT is not a contraceptive.**
- Urinary symptoms – occur due to the decline in hormone levels at the menopause and can cause the skin around the vagina and the urethra (urine passage) to become thin and unsupported. Symptoms include the need to pass urine often, and sometimes urgently. Some women may experience leakage of urine when coughing or running. You can help reduce these symptoms by drinking plenty of fluids and doing pelvic floor exercises. Another leaflet is available to explain this to you. Urine infections can be more common and drinking cranberry juice may help prevent them. If you think you may have a urine infection, please bring a fresh sample to the surgery for testing.
- Mood & emotions – coping with the symptoms of the menopause can be stressful. Mood swings, loss of confidence, forgetfulness, anxiety and depression are all common at this time. There are many ways to help yourself at this time, like making time for yourself and starting a hobby, but most importantly share your problems with a family member or a friend. If you are struggling you can talk to the Practice Nurse or the GP or the Practice Counsellor.
- Hot flushes – affect 80% of women and not only at night. They can be

accompanied by profuse sweating, redness of the skin and occasionally palpitations. Heat, caffeine, alcohol and spicy foods can all make matters worse.

- Irregular & heavy periods – are common as you approach the menopause. Most often, they become heavier and closer together for a time before spacing out and finally tailing off. However it is important that you should seek advice if you experience: bleeding after sex, bleeding between periods, bleeding again after your periods have stopped for a year, and any bleeding that floods your clothes and confines you to the house.
- Osteoporosis – is really all about prevention. Smokers and those severely underweight as well as women who have used the contraceptive injection Depo-Provera as their main method of birth control are at greater risk and should consider taking steps to reduce this. Smokers should think hard about stopping and users of the injection might wish to consider alternative methods.
- Screening – It is important to take advantage of the screening programmes for cervical cancer and breast cancer. You will be offered 3 yearly cervical smears from the age of 20 until 60 and breast mammography from 50 to 65 years. The upper age limit for breast screening is due to be increased to 70 from 2004.

Some useful web-addresses

The British Menopause Society

www.the-bms.org

Menopause Online

www.menopause-online.com

Health Education Scotland

www.hebs.scot.nhs.uk

Medicines Control Agency

www.mhra.gov.uk

Some useful telephone numbers

Breast Screening Unit 01224 550570