

Menopause

What is the menopause?

The word 'menopause' comes from the Greek words 'menos', meaning month, and 'pause', meaning to cease. Menopause means the monthly period stops.

The menopause is the final menstrual period. Usually you only know you have had your final menstrual period if you have had no period, bleeding, spotting or staining for 12 months, as periods can be irregular, infrequent and light before they finish permanently.

What happens at the menopause?

Women are born with about a million eggs in each ovary. At puberty about 300,000 eggs remain; by the menopause there are no active eggs left. An average woman in Australia has 400-500 periods in her lifetime. From about 35 to 40 years, the number of eggs left in your ovaries decreases more quickly and you ovulate (release an egg from the ovary) less regularly until your periods stop.



When does the menopause occur?

Most women reach menopause between 45 and 55 years of age – the average age of menopause for women in Australia is 51-52 years.

Menopause sometimes occurs earlier than expected as a result of cancer treatment, surgery or unknown causes.

The stages of the menopause

1. Perimenopause

The lead-up to the menopause (running out of eggs)

2. The menopause

The final menstrual period (no more eggs)

3. Postmenopause

Starts when you have had no periods for 12 months

Hormones & the menopause

Hormones are chemicals made in your body, which send out messages through the bloodstream. The hormones of particular relevance at menopause are oestrogen and, to a lesser degree, progesterone. The symptoms are created by changes in the levels of these hormones, which usually happen over months or years as you approach menopause. If menopause is induced by surgery or cancer treatment, there can be a sudden drop in all of these hormones, causing symptoms to be more severe.

Symptoms of the menopause

Symptoms of the menopause generally include:

- hot flushes, night sweats or feeling hot
- vaginal changes such as dryness and painful intercourse
- mood swings, which may include low mood, anxiety or irritability
- joint or muscle aches and pains
- crawling or itchy skin

- headaches
- lowered libido
- tiredness
- sleep disturbance, including insomnia
- forgetfulness
- weight gain, especially in the tummy region.

No two women will experience the menopause in the same way. Culture, health, previous experience of mood problems, lifestyle and whether you have had a natural, surgical or chemotherapy-induced menopause will all affect the experience of menopausal symptoms (ie, the type, quality, quantity and impact on quality of life).

What can you do to help with the menopause?

- Seek information. Increase your understanding of what changes are happening and how you can help yourself
- Be aware of practical strategies to stay cooler, such as carrying a hand fan or water facial spray and wearing layers of clothing to peel off when you are hot
- A healthy lifestyle can help to reduce symptoms of menopause:
 - a nutritious diet helps with fatigue and moodiness
 - being physically active helps with stress and mood
 - keep an eye on your alcohol and caffeine intake, as they are known to make hot flushes worse
 - weight loss can help reduce hot flushes
- Keep a record of the physical and emotional symptoms troubling you and list their frequency and effect on your daily life. This information can help clarify what changes you can make to reduce their impact
- Talk to your doctor about menopausal hormone therapy, or MHT (formerly called hormone replacement therapy, or HRT), used to ease

menopausal symptoms in healthy women; risks and benefits should be considered when deciding with your doctor whether to use MHT

- If you cannot take MHT, other medications such as antidepressants – selective serotonin (SSRIs) or norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs) – and a chronic pain medicine can reduce hot flushes
- Seek advice on complementary therapies that may help, including:
 - herbal and natural remedies: the herb black cohosh and eating phytoestrogens (eg, soy, lentils) may help with hot flushes; St John's Wort may help with mood changes at the menopause. The safety and effectiveness of other herbal remedies are not proven
 - cognitive behaviour therapy has been found to be effective in reducing the intensity and frequency of hot flushes, sweats and insomnia, with improvement in quality of life
 - hypnotherapy has also been shown to reduce hot flushes and sweats
 - relaxation: practising relaxation and controlled breathing may help hot flushes
- Look after your emotional health along with your physical health
- Depending on your symptoms, you may like to see a general practitioner, a gynaecologist, endocrinologist (hormone specialist), registered naturopath, psychologist or dietitian.

See your doctor if:

- you are troubled by less regular periods
- you have symptoms of menopause that interfere with daily life
- you have symptoms of depression and anxiety, including changes to your thinking, eating, sleeping and enjoyment of activities.

**For more information go to
jeanhailes.org.au/health-a-z/menopause**

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This fact sheet is designed to be informative and educational. It is not intended to provide specific medical advice or replace advice from your medical practitioner.

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