

MENOPAUSE INFORMATION FOR YOU

What is the menopause?

Menopause is your last menstrual period. In reality, your periods don't just stop. First they tend to become less frequent. It can take several years for a woman to go through the menopause completely. Women are said to have gone through the menopause (be postmenopausal) when they have not had a period at all for one year.

What causes the menopause?

A natural menopause occurs because as you get older your ovaries stop producing eggs and make less oestrogen (the main female hormone). The average age of the menopause in India is 46. Your menopause is said to be early if it occurs before the age of 45 and premature if it occurs before the age of 39 years. If you have had your womb (uterus) or ovaries removed for some reason, you may have early menopause.

What are the possible symptoms and problems of the menopause?

The menopause is a natural event. Every woman will go through it at some point. You may have no problems. However, it is common to develop one or more symptoms which are due to the low level of oestrogen. About 8 out of 10 women will develop menopausal symptoms at some point.

Short-term symptoms

These short-term symptoms only last for a few months in some women. However, for others they can continue for a few years after their last period:

- **Hot flushes.**
- **Sweats**
- **Other symptoms** such as headaches, tiredness, being irritable, difficulty sleeping, depression, anxiety, aches and pains, loss of sex drive (libido), and feelings of not coping as well as before.
- **Changes to your periods.**

Longer-term changes and problems

- Dry skin and losing hair
- Thinning of the genital area
- Osteoporosis
- Cardiovascular disease

Do I need any tests to see if I am going through the menopause?

Lipid profile, BP check, Mammogram, Pap smear, Thyroid tests and Sugar tests. Hormone blood tests are not usually needed to confirm that you are going through the menopause.

Do I need treatment for the menopause?

Without treatment, the short-term symptoms discussed above last for 2-5 years in most women. In some women they may last longer.

Non-HRT treatments for hot flushes and night sweats

Lifestyle

- Regular sustained aerobic exercise
- Wearing lighter-weight clothing,
- sleeping in a cooler room, and
- reducing stress.

There are some medicines other than HRT that can be used to relieve symptoms.

Non-HRT treatments for preventing osteoporosis

Ways to reduce your risk of developing brittle bones (osteoporosis) include:

- **Doing regular weight-bearing exercise.**
- **Eating a diet that includes foods rich in calcium and vitamin D.**
- **Taking dietary supplements of calcium and/or vitamin D**

Treating other symptoms

Various other symptoms may occur around the menopause (depression, anxiety, sleeping difficulty, etc). Treatment for these symptoms is much the same for women going through the menopause as for any other age group.

What is Menopausal hormone therapy?

All types of HRT contain an oestrogen hormone. If you take HRT it replaces the oestrogen that your ovaries no longer make after the menopause. HRT is available as tablets or cream.

What are the benefits of hormone replacement therapy?

HRT is a safe and effective treatment for most healthy women with symptoms, who are going through the menopause at the average age. The risks and benefits of HRT will vary according to your age and any other health problems you may have. We will be able to discuss any potential risks of HRT with you in detail.

Menopausal symptoms ease with MHT. Osteoporosis also reverses with MHT.

Are there some women who shouldn't take hormone therapy?

The risks of taking HT are thought to outweigh the benefits for some women. For example, HT may not be advised in the following cases:

- If you have a history of womb (endometrial) cancer, ovarian cancer or breast cancer.
- If you have a history of blood clots (a DVT or a PE). If you have a personal or family history of blood clots.
- If you have a history of heart attack, angina or stroke.
- If you have uncontrolled high blood pressure.
- If you are pregnant.
- If you have severe liver disease.
- If you have an undiagnosed breast lump.
- If you are being investigated for abnormal vaginal bleeding.

What about side-effects when taking hormone replacement therapy?

In the first few weeks some women may develop a slight feeling of sickness (nausea), some breast discomfort or leg cramps. These tend to go within a few months if you continue to use HRT.

So, should I take hormone replacement therapy, and for how long?

The benefits have to be balanced against the risks. Some of the risks associated with HRT increase the longer the time that you take HRT. You have to decide what is right for you, with advice from your doctor.

Some other points about hormone replacement therapy

- Those who have an intact uterus must take both estrogen and progesterone HRT.
- HRT does not act as a contraceptive.
- If you are taking HRT, you should have regular check-ups with your doctor.
- You should also be 'breast aware' and look out for any changes in your breasts. If you notice any lumps or problems that you are worried about, you should consult your doctor.