

Menopause and Perimenopause - a simple guide

What is the menopause?

The menopause starts when your periods stop. The time leading up to this is called the perimenopause.

The perimenopause starts when you feel your hormones start to change. Some women never experience symptoms in the perimenopause and their periods just stop without warning. Others find they have several years of changes in their periods and their body before they finally stop. During this period of time your hormone levels fluctuate up and down. It is common to have times of feeling almost 'back to normal' and other times when menopausal symptoms return

How can I tell 'where I am' in the perimenopause?

I am often asked if there are any tests that can predict how far someone is through the menopause, and how long they have to go before the symptoms stop.

If you are over 45 there are no tests needed to 'diagnose' the menopause. We can assume at that age that you are perimenopausal. There are no tests that will show us when your periods will stop or whether you will benefit from HRT.

The exception to this is if you are over 50 and on a method of contraception which stops your periods. We can then check the level of a hormone called FSH to try and work out when you can safely stop using contraception.

If you are under 45 and having symptoms there are some more tests that can be done. This is to try and make sure that the symptoms you are having are due to the menopause and not due to any other condition.

What symptoms might I experience?

Hot flushes are a common symptom. Women describe a feeling of heat spreading over the body. Some women may flush or sweat during these. They can occur at any time.

Poor sleep is one of the most common and distressing symptoms which I see. This is sometimes worsened by night sweats or anxiety. This contributes to a sensation of overwhelming **fatigue**.

Many women complain of **personality change**, becoming more irritable, angry or anxious. This is worsened by lack of sleep. Often they have already been prescribed antidepressants which have no, or only partial, effects.

A feeling of **'brain fog'** often occurs. This is usually described as difficulty concentrating or linking thoughts together. This can be a huge issue at work and at home.

Muscle aches and joint pains are common. Women who exercise regularly often find that they are not able to train as intensively as they did before. They might become tired more easily, or find that their muscles and joints hurt after exercise.

Hair and skin changes may also occur as the oestrogen level in the body lowers. Women may find that their skin gets dryer and thinner. Hair may thin on the head, or extra hair grow on the face.

Loss of libido (sexual desire) is a distressing symptom which women often feel unable to discuss with their doctor. This can have multiple different causes; from tiredness and anxiety, to pain and dryness of the vagina or vulva.

Changes in the vagina or vulva can include dryness, itching or pain. Oestrogen receptors are also found in the pelvic floor and at the entrance to the bladder. Symptoms of an irritable bladder, pain passing urine, or leaking urine, can sometimes be helped by HRT or vaginal oestrogen (see separate sheet).

Before you come to your appointment you may want to download the separate 'symptom checklist'. We can then address each symptom in your appointment.