

Be aware. Menopause ahead.

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What's going on with me? That's probably the most common question women have during perimenopause, when they find themselves in a fit of hot flashing or feel like their heart is going to beat right out of their chest. Although your periods are still fairly regular, hot flashes and palpitations are some of the more common wake-up calls of changing hormone levels. Perimenopause can begin as early as age 35 and last up to 13 years. You're not alone if you think menopause begins when you no longer have a period. The average age to be fully in menopause is 51; however you are only "officially" in menopause when you have gone one full year without a period. It's a real kicker but yes, you can still get pregnant until you are fully in menopause.

The second most common question is what should I do?

Many health experts today suggest that you first make sure that you are doing all of the things that you already know you should be doing. Get enough sleep, eat a balanced diet, drink plenty of water, and exercise regularly. If you smoke, stop. And if you abuse alcohol, seek help to taper off. These habits weigh heavily on your health as you age, and both give you more wrinkles. Perimenopause is an ideal time to shift your focus back onto yourself and your wellness. When you don't take care of yourself in your twenties you can get away with it, but now it really begins to show. Take heart. It's not too late, however. Perimenopause is the half-time bell and you still have the second half to play.

Perimenopause and menopause are changes, there is no denying it. Our periods are a familiar part of life. We know when we will bleed, how much, and for how long, we know when we will bloat, and we know when we'll shed tears for no good reason. I have heard women describe this time as losing something, as an ending to their youth and vitality, and as a sadness of no longer being able to have children, even when they really

don't want any more. But in truth, menopause is a new opportunity. It is your time to get clear on what you want and what matters to you the most. Pursue these things with all your enthusiasm, energy, and flair.

Know This: Menopause is *Not* a Disease

Good health doesn't start in your doctor's office. As much as I respect conventional medicine, it is designed to diagnose and treat disease. Perimenopause and menopause are not an illness or disease. For most women, hot flashes eventually go away and the body settles into its new comfort zone. There is no better time than menopause to pay attention and really listen to your body's needs so that you can start taking better care of yourself.

Where to Start?

If good health doesn't begin in the doctor's office, where does it start? It begins with you and the choices you make. For most women, dealing with symptoms of menopause can be a bit bewildering. Hormone replacement therapy is a course of action that many women took in the past, but frightening study results and dissatisfaction with the outcomes have led to new, excellent alternative therapies. Here are steps you can take today to begin addressing menopause symptoms:

1. Look for herbs and herbal combinations that have been clinically tested and have shown to ease symptoms.
2. Create a sound nutrition plan and include any high-quality supplements necessary to support your whole body—bones, heart, and brain.
3. Taking a high-quality multivitamin daily is essential to help support your added physical and mental needs during menopause and beyond.
4. Step outside for 10 to 15 minutes of sun, twice a day, to give your bones the necessary amount of vitamin D necessary to help keep them strong.
5. Doctors often recommend 100mcg of vitamin B complex and 400mcg of folic acid daily for supporting your bones, energy levels, and mood. 400mg of magnesium a day can also help maintain muscles, nerves, and bones. Essential fatty acids such as EPA and DHA from fish oil, GLA from borage oil and ALA from flax seed oil will support a positive mental outlook and joint mobility.

Survival Tips

If specific menopause symptoms are getting you down, here are some tips that may bring relief:

Hot flashes, and their counterpart night sweats are the most common complaint. The exact cause is unknown, but a sudden change in hormone levels confuses your internal thermostat, causing it to send out a message to your blood vessels, heart, and nervous system to work harder *and resulting in* a burst of heat.

What you can do: During the day, dress in layers so you can easily take one off and put it back on when you cool down. Take a few slow deep breaths to help calm your whole system. Carry a small Chinese fan. A breeze of cool air works wonders! At night skip the flannel PJs, and instead choose anything lightweight and 100% cotton. Who doesn't love to sink into the softness of a heavenly down comforter, only to fling it across the bed when you wake up drenched. Dress your bed in layers as well so you can easily take blankets off and put them on again as needed. Turn the heat down—or off—at night and open a window.

Heart palpitations and anxiety are sometimes felt because the heart and nervous system are involved in producing a hot flash. This can be nerve-racking but once you realize that changes in hormone levels could be the culprit, it should ease any fear. Of course if you are concerned about your heart, consult your doctor. FYI, no one has ever died of menopause and this too shall pass. Perimenopause and menopause are a natural and normal process. It may be difficult to see it now but there are several very nice benefits to being fully in menopause!

What you can do: The way you breathe affects your whole body. Full deep breathing is a good way to reduce tension, feel relaxed and release stress. There are numerous books and Internet resources available for learning breathing exercises and putting them into daily practice. Avoid caffeine, alcohol, and refined foods such as flour and sugar.

Chinese Acupuncture is increasingly used to relieve hot flashes. Women in a recent clinical trial had a 50-percent reduction in hot flashes.

Changes in menstrual flow and cycle include irregular periods that come more or less frequently, heavier or lighter bleeding, or lasting longer or shorter than usual. These are the changes that about 85 percent of all women experience. The perimenopause process is a slow one and the better you take care of yourself, the easier your transition will be.

What you can do: Be prepared and carry a tampon or pad in your purse and keep a supply at home, work, and car. Nutritional and herbal therapies can help with cramping, bloating, moodiness, and many other symptoms.

Vaginal dryness, atrophy and painful intercourse are part and parcel of changing hormone levels. Some women lose their desire for sex or have difficulty becoming aroused and reaching orgasm, while others have an increased desire.

What you can do: Using a vaginal moisturizer will ease dryness, irritation, and itching and a personal lubricant will help make intercourse more comfortable. Ask your doctor about Eros Therapy, an FDA-approved device for increasing vaginal lubrication and improving sexual dysfunction.

Moodiness and irritability come with PMS and the stress of changing hormone levels during perimenopause and menopause. Midlife for many women can also bring about other challenges, such as career changes, children leaving the nest, or divorce. As our lives change, so do our moods and reactions to circumstances.

What we can do about it: Give yourself the time you need to think things through. Pamper yourself. Take the down time you need. Exercise is another good way to bring perspective back and raise your mood-elevating hormones.

Dry skin, hair, nails and eyes are common as we go through menopause and also as we age. Dry eyes can be painful and hinder your vision. Dry skin can look more wrinkled and dull and can also itch.

What we can do: Drink plenty of water. Use high-quality skin treatments and moisturizing products. Rub oil into your nails and cuticles to soften them, and at least once a week deep-condition your hair. There are over-the-counter eye drops specifically designed to moisten dry eyes. If you are concerned about your eyes, speak with your eye doctor.

As you go through menopause, subtle lifestyle steps will help to reestablish natural hormone balance. There's nothing that menopause throws at you that you can't handle. Take it one day at a time. Learning new techniques and incorporating them into your life can go a long way toward relieving menopausal symptoms and increasing your overall health.