

All about menopause

By Emma Sutherland First published: March 6th, 2011



For many women, the "change in life" comes much earlier than expected, sometimes leading to traumatic consequences.

Menopause occurs when a woman's periods have stopped for more than 12 months or follicle-stimulating hormone levels are highly elevated.

During menopause, levels of oestrogen, progesterone and testosterone decline as ovulation ceases. The average age for menopause to occur is 51.5.

Perimenopause, when hormone levels begin to fluctuate, can occur up to four years before menopause, producing symptoms such as hot flashes, sleep disturbances, low libido, weight gain and mood changes.

We look at the two most common symptoms and how to treat them.

Hot flashes

These are due to small blood vessels in your skin dilating and you may also feel your heart race and become dizzy, sweaty and anxious. Hot flashes can occur as little as once a week or as often as every five minutes. They can be worse at night.

The first step is to cut out caffeine, alcohol and spicy foods. Caffeine activates the

adrenal glands, which results in a surge of the stress hormones, adrenaline and cortisol. This will exacerbate hot flushes and deplete your body of nutrients such as magnesium and B vitamins. Alcohol also puts a strain on your liver, which is responsible for breaking down fats.

You can also take herbs to support your body, such as zizyphus, shatavari and sage. Homeopathic remedies such as lachesis, sepia and ignatia can help.

Low libido

As levels of testosterone decrease your libido can take a nose dive. Your skin can become thinner and drier, which often results in vaginal dryness and painful intercourse.

The first step is to increase your intake of omega-3 fatty acids. Take fish oils and evening primrose oil daily and eat avocado regularly.

The herb Tribulus terrestris is my favourite for increasing libido and zinc supports your hormones.

Try using a natural lubricant for sex such as coconut oil or eggwhite.

There are also key things you can do for a symptom-free menopause:

- Ensure you have good stress-management techniques. As your ovaries stop producing oestrogen, the adrenal glands become your reservoir for oestrogen production. If your adrenals are exhausted, you're more likely to experience menopausal symptoms. Begin resistance exercise.
- Eat smaller, low-GI portions.
- Eat a Mediterranean diet.
- Eat more menopause-friendly foods such as fish, natural yoghurt, quinoa, broccoli, cabbage, tahini, almonds, pomegranate and oats.

Emma Sutherland is a naturopath and women's health specialist
www.healthequalsvitality.com.au.

At a glance

The three stages of menopause

1. Perimenopause This refers to the time from the onset of menopausal symptoms to 12 months after the last menstrual period. It can last up to five or six years.
2. Menopause This is said to have occurred when the ovaries have ceased functioning and there has been no menstruation for a year.
3. Post-menopause Begins one year after the last period. There is no way to predict how long this phase will last, but for many women it will resolve within a few years.