

How to manage menopause



**YOUR
HEALTH**

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Women enter the reproductive phase of their lives when they attain menarche, or have their first menstrual period. At that time, the hormones oestrogen and progesterone trigger many changes in the body. A girl grows taller, develops breasts and hair in the armpits and pubic area. The age at which this occurs varies between 9 and 16 years.

Menstruation eventually stops at menopause, which marks the end of a woman's reproductive life and occurs between the ages of 45 and 55. It is diagnosed if there have been no menstrual periods for a full year.

For about five to eight years before menopause, women go through a transitional period called perimenopause. Their hormone levels fluctuate. Monthly periods are irregular, cycles may become shorter or longer, and the flow heavier or lighter. Sometimes an entire month may pass without a period.

The blood level of FSH (follicle stimulating hormone) usually rises above 25-30 mIU/mL after menopause. However, a single blood test is rarely diagnostic because FSH levels can fluctuate considerably.

As oestrogen levels decline, the metabolic rate slows, so even if a woman has not increased her food intake or reduced her physical activity, she may gain 10-12 kilo. Much of this weight is deposited as visceral fat around the abdomen rather than on the hips. At the same time, muscle mass also gradually decreases.

Oestrogen plays an important role in maintaining healthy skin. Collagen and elastin, the proteins that keep the skin firm and supple, decline as oestrogen levels fall. As a result, the skin may begin to sag, and wrinkles become more noticeable. Hair is also affected. It becomes dry, brittle and loses its natural shine. Hair follicles gradually die

and are not replaced, making the hair thinner. As oestrogen levels fall, the influence of testosterone, the male hormone, increases. This may result in unwanted hair appearing on the upper lip, chin and jaw. Initially, these hairs are fine but often become coarser over time.

Body temperature is regulated by the hypothalamus in the brain. Falling oestrogen levels make this temperature control centre hypersensitive, causing it to mistakenly signal that the body is overheated. The result is a hot flash, often accompanied by sweating, flushing and sometimes shivering. When these episodes occur at night, they are known as night sweats and can significantly disrupt sleep.

Low oestrogen levels combined with poor sleep may lead to memory lapses, difficulty concentrating and brain fog.

Oestrogen offers women significant protection against heart disease. About 10 years after menopause,

however, this protection is lost, and a woman's risk of heart attack becomes similar to that of men. Oestrogen deficiency also accelerates bone loss, increasing the risk of osteoporosis and fractures.

Menopause is a natural stage in the cycle of life. To make

the transition easier, avoid common triggers for hot flashes such as excessive caffeine, spicy foods, alcohol and tobacco. Keep your surroundings cool, use fans or air conditioning and wear lightweight cotton clothing.

Facial hair can be removed with creams, threading, shaving or waxing, either at home or in a salon.

Women who lead sedentary lives are more likely to experience hot flashes, insomnia, osteoporosis, brain fog and poor cardiovascular health. Aim for at least 30 minutes of aerobic exercise every day, such as jogging, cycling, swimming, dancing or even figure-of-eight (infinity) walking indoors. Add strength training twice a week using 1-2 kilo dumbbells or even one-litre water bottles. Yoga, with its stretching and flexibility exercises, should be practised regularly, followed by 10 minutes of meditation to improve relaxation and mental clarity.



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