

## The Seven Dwarves of Menopause



Itchy, Bitchy, Sweaty, Sleepy, Bloating, Forgetful & Psycho

### What is the menopause?

Menopause is the medical term used for the last menstrual period a woman will ever have. However, the term is more often used to describe the years leading up to this time, also called the 'change of life' or just 'the change'. This period is more accurately known as climacteric.

Menopause occurs when both ovaries used up their egg cells. Egg cells are necessary for the ovary to function and to produce the hormones estrogen and progesterone.

Menopause also occurs when both ovaries are removed. This is sometimes necessary and women who lost their ovaries have the same symptoms as women where the menopause occurs naturally.

Menopause occurs normally between the ages of 45 - 55 years. (With some differences in different populations and in the reports of different researchers. The average age in Britain for the menopause to occur is 51 years old.) This age is independent of the number of children, the use hormonal contraception (The Pill) or other factors. All women use up their egg cells at about the same age.

The lack of estrogen causes the symptoms experienced by post menopausal women. The most common being hot flushes, dry vagina, tiredness, mood swings, night sweat and disrupted sleep (insomnia) the incidence and severity of the symptoms differs from woman to woman.

After a woman has had her last menstrual period she can no longer bear children naturally.

### What causes the menopause and why does it happen?

There is a steady reduction of the eggs every female is born with over time as some never mature and others are released each month as your period. By the time most women have reached their late 40's the supply of eggs remaining in the ovaries has fallen to low numbers.

The pituitary gland produces a substance called follicle stimulating hormone (F.S.H.), which is the main hormone involved in producing mature eggs but the eggs that now remain are unable to respond as well to F.S.H. as they did when they were younger.

As a result the ovaries will start failing to release eggs and there will be a greatly reduced production of the sex hormones oestrogen and progesterone. However, the hormone F.S.H. which is always present in the body, will increase dramatically as the pituitary gland makes more F.S.H. in an attempt to encourage the ovaries to respond and cause the remaining eggs to mature. At this time your periods will probably become irregular and unpredictable (until they stop altogether).

The hormones oestrogen and progesterone control your monthly cycle and prepare your body for pregnancy every month. When pregnancy does not occur, your body releases an egg and you have a period. It is the reduced levels of these hormones, which produce the symptoms of the menopause. The menopause is simply a period of adjustment to lower hormone levels in your body.

## What are the symptoms of the menopause?

Symptoms of the menopause may include any of the following:

- Periods - most women's periods will become unpredictable for several months and in some cases for a few years before they actually stop. The blood flow may also vary from light one month to heavy the next.
- Hot flushes - the most common symptom of the menopause. Hot flushes are sudden intense waves of heat, sometimes accompanied by redness and sweating. They can occur at any time and some women find that these flushes disrupt their sleep. Hot flushes can last anything from a few seconds up to several minutes and at the start of the menopause can occur as frequently as several times an hour. Hot flushes can be triggered by spicy foods and alcohol. Hot flushes can be uncomfortable, but they are not harmful.
- Vaginal dryness - your vagina may become dryer and much thinner, making sex painful and uncomfortable. The thinning of the vagina walls also puts you at an increased risk of vaginal infections like thrush and cystitis. Remember, if you do notice any unusual discharge or bleeding from your vagina, a visit to your doctor may be needed.
- Feeling emotional and depressed - the menopause can make many women experience headaches, forgetfulness and make them irritable - having unexpected mood swings. Many women go through similar emotions and even though you may not think so, people will understand and make allowances.
- Tiredness - this can often be due to difficulties in sleeping.

The menopause does not happen immediately and symptoms of the menopause can continue for an average of 4 years. However, the majority of women continue to function well during the menopause. For some women the menopause brings a sense of freedom since the end of fertility means no more birth control and dealing with periods, which may have been heavy or painful.

## What treatment is available for the menopause?

Many symptoms of the menopause can be reduced with certain lifestyle changes such as exercise and diet and more medical treatments such as HRT. Here are some of the things that you can do to relieve the symptoms of menopause

Exercise, such as walking for 20-30 minutes, 3-4 times a week, will help maintain general fitness, reduce the risk of you developing heart disease and will strengthen the bones.

Eat a well balanced diet containing foods which provide calcium, such as milk products, cheese, sardines, salmon and green leafy vegetables. A good intake of calcium will slow down bone thinning and help to

prevent bone fractures. In moderation a small glass or 2 of red wine can reduce the risk of heart disease and cancer.

Vaginal lubricant like KY jelly available from most pharmacies.

Wear layers of clothes that you can peel off if you are suffering from hot flushes and sweating.

Supplements, (e.g. evening primrose oil and vitamin D) as these can help some women cope with symptoms of the menopause.

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) and can help ease or prevent some of the symptoms of the menopause. It is designed to make up for the loss of oestrogen.



## Female Menopause

The symptoms of menopause differ from woman to woman. Read our article for advice and information about available treatments for the symptoms of menopause.

## Women's health matters