

Understanding Menopause



Menopause is the time in a woman's life when she stops having monthly menstrual periods. It is signalled by 12 months after her last menstruation. At this time, her ovaries stop releasing eggs and stop producing the hormones oestrogen and progesterone. Menopause usually occurs between the ages of 45 and 55, with the average age for Australian women at 51.

Signs and symptoms

The list of menopause symptoms is vast and varies from woman to woman. Because many of these can be associated with other medical conditions, your GP may overlook menopause as the primary cause and misdiagnose.

While you may not experience all the symptoms listed below, you are most likely to experience one or a combination of them.

- **Hot flashes** – Hot flashes feel like a wave of heat that starts in your chest and face and then moves through your body. Hot flashes usually start happening before you stop having menstrual periods.



- **Night sweats** – When hot flashes happen during sleep, they are called “night sweats,” commonly interrupting a good night's sleep.
- **Sleep problems** – Some women find it hard to fall asleep or stay asleep during the transition into menopause. Women who aren't experiencing night sweats may also experience sleep problems.
- **Vaginal dryness** – Menopause can cause the vagina and tissues near the vagina to become dry and thin. In turn, this can be uncomfortable or lead to painful sex.
- **Depression** – During the transition to menopause, some women start having signs of depression. That's especially true for women who have experienced depression before. Depression symptoms include:
 - Sadness.
 - Lack of motivation or interest in doing things.
 - Sleeping too much or too little.

- Trouble concentrating or remembering things – This might be caused by lack of sleep, which often happens during menopause. Some experts suggest that this could also be from low levels of oestrogen, which is essential for good brain function.

Other symptoms you may notice include:

- Breast tenderness
- Thinning of hair
- Forgetfulness
- Joint and muscular pain
- Heart palpitations

How do I know if I'm going through menopause?

The sure sign of menopause is the lack of a menstrual cycle for one full year (12 months). Before which you may notice a few perimenopausal symptoms such as

- a change in menstrual bleeding pattern/flow
- menstrual bleeding that lasts for fewer days than before
- hot flashes

If your uterus has been removed, but you still have your ovaries, it might be more difficult to tell that you are going through menopause, although you can still have menopause symptoms. If your ovaries were removed before the usual age of menopause, this is considered “surgical menopause,” you may experience menopause earlier than most women.

Treatment options for menopause

In most cases, you do not need to see a doctor as you enter this phase of your life. But, should you experience uncomfortable symptoms that impact your daily life, the following treatment options are available.

- **Hormone therapy (oestrogen)**

Menopausal Hormone Therapy (MHT) is one of the most effective treatments for most menopause symptoms. In some cases, MHT can reduce the risk of diabetes and heart disease.

Women who have vaginal dryness without other symptoms of menopause can try 'vaginal oestrogen.' Vaginal oestrogen is inserted directly into the vagina. It comes in creams, tablets, or a flexible ring. Vaginal oestrogen is provided in small doses and is designed to have minimal impact on levels of oestrogen in other parts of the body.

If you have had a hysterectomy, Dr Kothari may suggest this as a form of treatment.

- **Combined oestrogen and progesterone hormone therapy**

If you have not undergone a hysterectomy, your recommended course of treatment will be - what is known as - combined MHT with oestrogen and progesterone.

Experts believe these hormones are effective and safe for many women experiencing symptoms of menopause in their 40s and 50s.

Next Steps

More information
Contact our advice team on
02 4225 1999

Diagnosis and treatment
Contact us to book an appointment
with Dr Kothari
02 4225 1999

IMPORTANT

- **If you want to take hormones, please discuss your options with Dr Kothari. You should not take hormones if you have had breast cancer, a heart attack, a stroke, or a blood clot.**

- **Antidepressants**

If you are showing signs of depression, Dr Kothari may recommend antidepressants after carefully examining you.

Alternatively, your doctor may prescribe antidepressants to help with hot flashes.

- **Natural remedies**

If you are seeking natural remedies, vitamins and herbal supplements are available. However, these are not well-researched and studied. Therefore, they may not be as effective as placebos and could lead to adverse effects.

IMPORTANT

- **Please discuss your options with Dr Kothari before using 'natural remedies.' Some natural remedies might not be safe, especially for women who have a history of breast cancer.**

Menopause and osteoporosis

Osteoporosis is a condition in which the bones become weak and brittle due to the loss of calcium and other minerals as we age. After menopause, women are prone to osteoporosis as oestrogen levels drop.

To help protect your bones, you can take calcium and vitamin D supplements. Regular exercise - such as walking or light running, can also help encourage bone strength. If you believe you have osteoporosis as a result of menopause, Dr Kothari will first assess your condition before referring you for a bone density test or prescribing medicine.

Staying healthy during and after menopause

During and after menopause, hormonal changes can increase your risk of developing certain health-related issues. Hence, you must maintain a healthy lifestyle. Below are a few tips to get you started.

- Eat a healthy diet.
- Ensure you include enough calcium and vitamin D in your diet.
- Get plenty of physical exercise.
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Do not smoke or use products containing tobacco.

Treatment costs

Depending on the level of treatment and care you require, the costs will vary from patient to patient. The exact structure of the cost and what you can claim on Medicare and private health insurance can be discussed with your doctor before you undergo any form of surgery.

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