

Menopause and Hormones

Menopause is the stage of life when a woman's period ends. Her ovaries produce fewer eggs and eventually stop. According to the National Institute on Aging, the average age of menopause is 51; however, many women experience perimenopause in their 30s and 40s -- a stage of transition where symptoms start early.

Top 5 Symptoms Women Experience Approaching Menopause, from the FDA

1. A change in the menstrual cycle -- the time between periods and the flow may differ
2. Hot flashes in the face, neck, and chest
3. Sleeping problems and night sweats that may lead to a woman feeling stressed, tired, and tense
4. The vagina may become thin and dry, making sex painful
5. Thinning of the bones that can lead to bone breaks (osteoporosis) and loss of height

A woman reaches menopause when she has missed her period for 12 months in a row, according to the FDA. Some women opt to use hormone therapy -- estrogen or estrogen with progestin -- to treat the symptoms of menopause.

What Moms Should Know about Menopause and Hormones

Women have been using hormone therapy to treat the symptoms of menopause for many years, but in 2002, a large clinical trial showed that it also poses health risks, according to the Mayo Clinic. Many women today question whether or not to undergo treatment.

The benefits of hormone therapy include:

- It is the most effective FDA-approved medicine for hot flashes and night sweats.
- Estrogen may ease the symptoms of vaginal drying, itching, burning, and discomfort during sex, reports the Mayo Clinic.
- Women who take estrogen for a short term may help protect themselves from osteoporosis, colorectal cancer, and heart disease, according to the Mayo Clinic.

Estrogen is usually prescribed along with progestin, because taking estrogen alone can increase a woman's risk for uterine cancer. Women who have had a hysterectomy may take estrogen alone.

The FDA says hormone therapy may increase a woman's chances for the following: breast cancer, stroke, heart attack, gall bladder disease, and blood clots.

Estrogen can increase a woman's risk of endometrial cancer if she still has a uterus. Taking progesterin with estrogen lowers this risk.

Women should not take hormone therapy if they believe they could be pregnant, have had certain types of cancers, experience problems with vaginal bleeding, have had blood clots, have liver disease, or have had a heart attack or stroke within the last 12 months, warns the FDA.

Although there are risks, hormone therapy is still the best treatment for symptoms of menopause, according to the Mayo Clinic. The benefits of short-term therapy outweigh the risks for women experiencing hot flashes and other symptoms. Long-term therapy for postmenopausal conditions is no longer routinely recommended.

If you choose to do short-term hormone therapy, the Mayo Clinic recommends discussing these strategies with your doctor for reducing potential risks:

- Time your treatment correctly. The risk of heart disease is not significantly raised in women under 60 years old. Estrogen may even protect the heart early on in menopausal years.
- Use the lowest amount of medication necessary for the shortest amount of time to treat symptoms of menopause. But do not be afraid to use the therapy for as long as you experience debilitating symptoms.
- Estrogen may be taken in the form of a pill, patch, vaginal cream, or slow-releasing suppository or vaginal ring. Discuss the best method with your doctor, depending on your symptoms.

The Mayo Clinic says the bottom line on hormone therapy is that it is not all good or all bad. Talk to your doctor about your individual symptoms and risks in order to make the best decision for your health.

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