

Menopause Awareness

The menopause is a natural phase of life when women stop having periods, which is caused by a change in the balance of the body's reproductive hormones (oestrogen, progesterone and testosterone). This starts to happen when your ovaries begin to run out of their store of eggs, and as the number of eggs decreases, the ability of the ovaries to produce hormones declines. This article has been created by Care first to raise awareness about Menopause and the way it can impact women who are experiencing it.

The average age for reaching menopause in the UK is 51, however women usually start to notice changes happening in their 40s. This phase is known as the Perimenopause and can last up to 10 years before periods finally stop.

How will I know if I have reached Menopause?

Women will have officially reached menopause when they have not had a period for 12 consecutive months. Symptoms can also continue for some time beyond this point, which is known as post-menopause. 1 in 100 women will experience symptoms before they are 40 years of age, and some women will start even earlier which is known as Premature Ovarian Insufficiency. You can learn more about 'What is menopause' through websites and sources such as The Menopause Charity <https://www.themenopausecharity.org/menopause/>

Symptoms of Perimenopause and Menopause can include:

- Hot or cold flushes
- Night sweats
- Heart palpitations
- Vaginal dryness and discomfort during sex
- Difficulty sleeping
- Low mood / anxiety / depression
- Reduced sex drive (libido)
- Problems with memory and concentration (brain fog)
- Migraines / headaches,
- Dry eyes,
- Thinning hair,
- Urinary changes,
- Breast tenderness
- Weight gain

You may also notice changes to your menstrual cycle with periods coming closer together, or further apart, becoming more painful, heavier, and passing clots.

These symptoms can be debilitating and very difficult to manage, particularly in the workplace. If you have noticed any changes to your body, please consider talking to your GP, especially if you're experiencing symptoms of the perimenopause before 45 years of age.

What will happen if I go to my GP?

A GP may offer you a blood test to check your FSH levels (these will be raised if your hormones are low), but this is not a guaranteed indicator of perimenopause as your hormones will be fluctuating and the blood test is just a small 'snapshot' of the overall picture. If you are over 45, the NICE (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) guidelines state that you can be diagnosed as perimenopausal by your symptoms alone.

It is very useful to keep a diary of your symptoms, which will capture the whole picture rather than going to the GP with one symptom at a time. This also helps to make the most of your appointment with the GP. Try downloading the free 'Balance' app – more information is at this website: Balance - Balance app (balance-menopause.com)

How your GP can help:

Your GP may suggest replacing your declining hormones with Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT). Most women can take HRT safely and the risks of modern HRT are very low, as the oestrogen can be taken as a gel or a patch where the hormones are absorbed directly through the skin so there is no risk of clot.

Modern HRT consists of replacing your own body's natural hormones and the long term health benefits are clear: reduced risks of dementia, osteoporosis, heart disease and diabetes. If you don't want or are unable to take HRT, your GP may suggest other options. These will vary depending on your symptoms, but may include talking therapies, vaginal lubricants and medicines to treat specific symptoms such as migraines or poor sleep.

Complementary therapies such as aromatherapy, acupuncture and reflexology can also improve the symptoms of the menopause. Some women have found that herbal remedies can be beneficial. Eating a balanced diet, maintaining a healthy BMI, drinking less alcohol, stopping smoking and exercising regularly can also help.

The good news is that there is lots of help available and you need not suffer through this stage of your life. If you would like more information on the perimenopause and the menopause, please visit this website which is run by the UK's leading menopause expert Dr Louise Newson: Balance - Homepage (balance-menopause.com).

What are the myths around Menopause?

- **Myth:** HRT causes breast cancer.
Fact: HRT with oestrogen alone is associated with no or lower risk of breast cancer.
- **Myth:** HRT increases the risk of heart attack and stroke
Fact: Taking HRT before the age of 60 actually reduces your risk of heart attack and stroke.
- **Myth:** You should wait until your symptoms are unbearable before you start taking HRT
Fact: You can start taking HRT as soon as you begin experiencing symptoms, even if you're still having periods.
- **Myth:** HRT carries the same risks as the contraceptive pill
Fact: Although HRT contains similar hormones, they are in much lower doses.

- **Myth:** You need blood tests and examinations before your doctor will prescribe HRT
Fact: If you're over 45 and experiencing symptoms, you don't usually need blood tests

More information

If you would like to view the Webinar on '**Menopause Awareness**' this is being delivered live on **Friday 20th May at 12pm**, please use the following link to register for this session – <https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/2878690089444928781>

If you are unable to join the webinar live, a recording of the session can be accessed using the same link above after the webinar has taken place.

If you feel you may need some support, you can contact Care first. Care first is a leading provider of confidential, professional counselling, information and advice services. All employees are eligible to use Care first, our services include; telephone counselling, information services and online support. Call Care first on the Freephone number provided by your organisation and you can speak to a professional in confidence.