Health Facts: Menopause

Overview

Menopause is a natural part of the female reproductive cycle when monthly menstrual periods end permanently, signifying the end of childbearing years. Menopause is said to have occurred when a woman has not had a menstrual period for 12 months.

Symptoms

About four to eight years before natural menopause, menopause-related changes may begin. This is called perimenopause. Symptoms of perimenopause and menopause may include:

- Irregular periods
- Changes in hormones
- Hot flashes (sudden warm feeling, sometimes with blushing)
- Night sweats (hot flashes that occur at night, often disrupting sleep)
- Fatigue (probably from disrupted sleep patterns)
- Mood swings
- Vaginal dryness
- Fluctuations in sexual desire or response
- Difficulty sleeping

Facts to Know

The average age for menopause in the United States is 51. It can occur as early as your 30s and, rarely, as late as your 60s. Menopause before age 45 is considered early menopause.

Perimenopause, the time leading up to menopause, usually begins in your 40s. You may experience irregular periods, moodiness and other symptoms as your hormone levels decline and ovulation fluctuates.

Fertility decreases gradually as menopause approaches, but you can still get pregnant, even if your periods are irregular. To avoid pregnancy, use birth control until you have gone 12 months without a period.

Some women continue to experience premenstrual syndrome (PMS) symptoms as they approach menopause. These symptoms can include swollen or tender breasts, bloating, nausea and moodiness.

Estrogen helps prevent bone loss. As your estrogen production declines around menopause, your risk of osteoporosis increases. Regular exercise can help lessen that risk.

Estrogen also helps protect against heart disease. As estrogen production declines, your risk of coronary artery disease increases. After age 55, heart disease causes more than half of all deaths in women.

With estrogen decline, vaginal tissue and tissue in the lower urinary tract become thinner, drier and less supple, causing painful intercourse and more frequent urinary tract infections in some women.

Quality of life does not necessarily decline after menopause. In one study, 80 percent of women in menopause reported no decrease in quality of life, and 75 percent felt they had no loss in attractiveness.

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