

Menopause

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Menopause is an important phase in a woman's life. Menopause essentially means permanent cessation of menstruation. Usually a woman attains menopause around the age of 45-50. Given that the average life expectancy of human beings is increasing the world over, a woman may end up spending almost a third of her life span in the post-menopausal period, if not more.

When a woman is around 45-50 years of age, due to lack of certain substances called hormones, a woman faces many physical problems. At this period of life, a woman also enters the second phase of her life, when her children leave the home for higher studies or jobs or for starting a family life of their own. This leads to many emotional upheavals in a woman. Understanding the changes in one's body and the means to overcome the difficulties associated with menopause can be very helpful in tiding over this period of time in a woman's life.

In the early part of menopause, a small percentage of women may feel episodes of feeling very hot, followed by a lot of sweating. During this period, fluctuations in hormones can also cause mental disturbances like feeling depressed, angry, or having crying spells. If these changes are very disturbing, taking medications can help a woman to have a better quality of life. As a woman ages, due to lack of hormones, there are formation of holes in the bone, which in medical language is called osteoporosis. Taking the right diet and exercise and if necessary, medications, can prevent or cure this condition. What follows are descriptions of certain conditions which may affect some percentage of women going through menopause.

Hot flushes:

Hot flushes are sudden or mild waves of heat on the upper part of the body that last from 30 seconds to a few minutes, caused by decreased estrogen production during menopause. Estrogen is a hormone produced by ovaries, which functions only minimally after menopause. Hot flushes are typically experienced as a feeling of intense heat with sweating and rapid heartbeat, and may last from two to ten minutes for each occurrence. The sensation of heat usually begins in the face or face and chest, although it may appear elsewhere such as the back of the neck, and it can spread

throughout the whole body. In addition to being an internal sensation, the surface of the skin, especially on the face, becomes hot to the touch. The sensation of heat is often accompanied by



visible reddening of the face.

The hot flush event may be repeated a few times each week or constantly throughout the day, with the frequency reducing over time. Some women undergoing menopause never have hot flashes. Others have mild or infrequent flushes. The worst sufferers experience dozens of hot flashes each day. In addition, hot flashes are often more frequent and more intense during hot weather or in an overheated room. Hot flashes may be accompanied by perspiration and shivering, increased heart rate and/or feelings of irritation, anxiety, or panic. Not all women going through menopause get hot flashes. Various studies quote various figures for the percentage of women suffering from hot flashes at the time of menopause. The quoted figures vary from 56% (2) to 79% .

There may also be episodes of nighttime sweating, which can range from mild to profuse. They usually accompany hot flashes, and thus the usual accompaniments of hot flashes, viz: nausea, chills, headache, etc may accompany episodes of night sweats. Hot flashes can begin during the late premenopausal or early perimenopausal years, but they become more frequent and severe during the late perimenopausal and early postmenopausal years. Hot flashes can last from a few seconds to more than an hour and persist for 1 year in 95% of affected women and up to 5 years in 65% of affected women.

Spicy foods and hot drinks can trigger hot flashes. Stress cannot trigger hot flashes, but, it is possible that stress of midlife transitions (aging parents, retirement) or other stressful events may increase the frequency and/or intensity of hot flashes.

In mild cases, physical measures like avoiding synthetic clothes, spicy food, too much caffeine or alcohol, keeping a cool environment, avoiding layered clothing, etc, may help. Meditations, deep breathing exercises, and measures to reduce stress can all help.

However, in severe cases, medications called oestrogens, will be required. Treatment with oestrogen, is called hormone replacement therapy. Non-hormonal treatment like isoflavone tablets may suffice for milder symptoms. There are many other medications also available for treatment of hot flashes, for women who are not fit candidates for oestrogen treatment.

Usually hot flashes last only for 3-5 years, and drugs will be needed only for that period. However, each individual is a different person, and the duration of therapy has to be tailored as per the requirements of that person, by the doctors prescribing the medication.

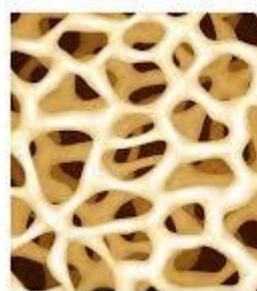
Oestrogens made by plants, called phytoestrogens are available in large amounts in food products like soy products, and sesame seeds (til). Smaller amounts are available in chickpeas (Bengal gram,

channa), garlic, Mung bean sprouts, dried apricots, dried dates, sunflowerseeds, almonds, green bean and peanuts.

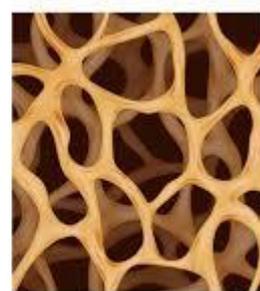


They are not as potent as the oestrogens made by the human body, but they have much less side effects compared to human oestrogen.

Osteoporosis:



Normal Bone



Bone with Osteoporosis

This is caused by thinning of bone tissue and loss of bone density over time. Two essential minerals for normal bone formation are calcium and phosphate. After menopause sets in, oestrogen levels fall ,

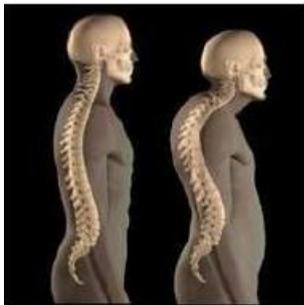
and this leads to osteoporosis. Decreased dietary intake of calcium, lack of weight bearing exercise, also contribute to the setting of osteoporosis.

Due to porous bones, the bones may become smaller, and this may not always cause pain in the woman. These changes are shown on X-ray only after considerable bone is lost from the body. Sophisticated tests like calcaneal ultrasound and Densitometry can detect it much earlier, and remedial measures can be undertaken.



Dexa scan machine;

Osteoporosis is a silent disease. It may not cause any symptoms till there are minute fractures called fragility fractures, which commonly occur in vertebra(Backbone), rib, wrist, and hip. Multiple vertebral fractures lead to a stooped posture, loss of height, and chronic pain with resultant reduction in mobility in the elderly. If there is loss of more than 1.5 inches then it means already there are micro-fractures in the spine. This hump is because of weak extensor muscles of the back along with very small fractures of the upper backbone which go unnoticed most of the time and are not diagnosed in more than one-third cases. This interferes with the quality of women's life by causing chronic backache, decreased chest space resulting in respiratory problems and decreased abdominal space leading to poor digestion.



Doing weight bearing exercises for about half an hour per day after the age of 35 is a good way of keeping osteoporosis away. Taking calcium rich food like milk or milk products, green leafy vegetables, and legumes, can also prevent osteoporosis.



Calcium excretion is enhanced with intake of tea or coffee and one should cut down on their consumption.

Low backache in middle aged women:

Low backache in the 40 plus woman could be due to lumbar strain. A lumbar strain is a stretch injury to the ligaments, tendons, and/or muscles of the low back. The stretching incident results in



microscopic tears of varying degrees in these tissues.

The condition is characterized by localized discomfort in the low back area with onset after an event that mechanically stressed the lumbar tissues. The treatment of lumbar strain consists of resting the back (to avoid reinjury), medications to relieve pain and muscle spasm, local heat applications, massage, and eventual (after the acute episode resolves) reconditioning exercises to strengthen the low back and abdominal muscles. Resting the back should not go on for too long, as this can also be bad for the back.

Other causes of back ache could be bony projections hitting the spinal nerves or degenerative conditions of the bones or joints of the back.



Correct diagnosis can be evolved with investigations.

Conditions affecting the uterus or ovaries can also rarely cause backache, and this should be ruled out. However, in majority of cases, back ache is caused by abnormalities caused in the back itself. If

the source of the pain lies in the reproductive organs, other problems often occur as well, including a sensation of pressure on the bladder, urinary urgency, and pain during urination, defecation or sexual intercourse.

Knee pain

Pain in the knees could be caused due to inflammation in the knee joint, injury to muscles or ligaments around the knees, or even degeneration of the bones near the knee joints, called



osteoarthritis. None of these conditions are caused by menopause. It is a misconception to think that hysterectomy can lead to many aches and pains. Treatment of osteoarthritis involves stretching of the thigh muscles. In the sitting posture, straighten the leg, hold it there a bit, and then bend it to reach the original position. Repeat the exercise as often as possible. This quadriceps stretching exercise, along with a drug called Glucosamine can reduce early stages of osteoarthritis of the knee.

Need for calcium supplementation:

Oestrogen has a role to play in bone formation. It helps to incorporate the mineral calcium into the bone. In the absence of oestrogen, a woman will need to take more calcium in her diet, as there is no more protection of bone by oestrogen. After the age of 50, 1200-1500mg/day is the requirement of calcium for a woman. This much calcium cannot be provided by the average Indian diet, which gives only about 600-800 mg of calcium per day. Therefore calcium supplementation by way of tablets are necessary in this group.

Vaginal dryness and increased frequency of urination

In the late ages, around 60 to 70 years of age, reddish marks in the vagina are usually caused due to atrophy of the vaginal skin, which breaks off, causing the spots. At this age, it is caused due to lack of the hormone oestrogen. Local oestrogen creams or tablets could help in this condition.

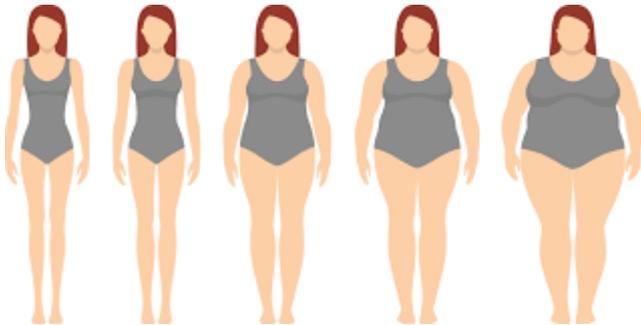
Menopause could also bring about lack of lubrication during intercourse. Local lubricant creams or oestrogen creams could help.

Old ladies also cannot hold urine for long and get distressed as they have to frequently visit the toilet. They also get frequent attacks of urinary infection. This can be cured with antibiotics and local oestrogen cream, as deficiency of hormone can also lead to frequent urinary infection. Some women run from one doctor to another, changing antibiotics. Using oestrogen creams along with many other modalities of treatment is necessary in these women to treat recurrent urinary tract infection.



Older women tend to have urgency incontinence, not being able to hold urine. In addition to local hormone, there are also drugs which can relax the bladder muscles. Taking these medicines can help the woman to hold urine for longer times.

Increased weight gain around the waist: In the middle age, women tend to put on more weight with the same amount of food that they used to eat in their youth.



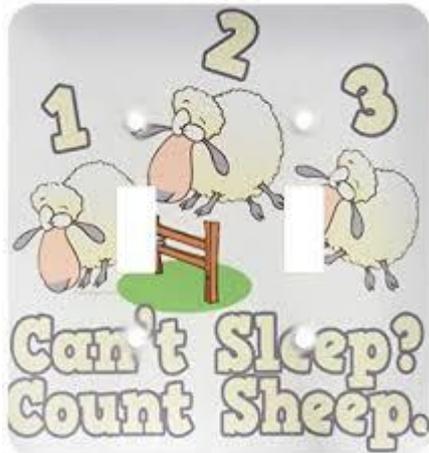
They need to exercise more than young people to burn the same amount of calories. Since most people continue to eat the same quantity of food as before, and exercise a little less they do tend to put on weight in the middle age. Most of the weight is put on the abdomen than elsewhere. This selective accumulation of fat around the waist is not an indication of any disease .

Itching in private parts:

Commonest cause for itching in the vulva is fungal infection. Lack of oestrogen in menopause could aggravate it. Antifungal creams along with local oestrogen therapy could help. Other infections should be looked for and treated.

Sleep disturbance:

Sleep disturbances, like inability to get sleep, waking up too early, etc, is common in this age group, but is not always due to hormone disturbances.



It could be part of depression. In such cases, antidepressant medications prescribed by a doctor could be helpful in improving sleep. Sleep disturbance could be caused by hot flushes, as the woman tends to wake up off and on because of severe hot flushes. In such cases, treatment of hot flushes with drugs or diet can cure hot flushes and thereby improve sleep. Following good sleep hygiene may help. This means sleeping at regular times, avoiding heavy evening meals and stimulants, sleeping in a dark, quiet room, restricting the bedroom to sleep, and a relaxing activity or warm milk at bedtime. Physical activity levels are associated with better sleep quality and there is evidence that adopting a regular exercise habit might be beneficial. Both regular walking and stretching appear beneficial but vigorous exercise should be avoided close to retiring.

Mental disturbances :

Women in their menopausal period may suddenly develop depressive symptoms, like easy crying, easy irritability, or sleeplessness. Usually at this time, the woman also faces an "Empty nest



syndrome".

This means, till about 40 years, her house was filled with echoes of her children asking her for something or screaming for something not done. But suddenly they leave her and fly away to be on their own. She suddenly feels unwanted and this adds to her symptoms of depression. Crying spells and inability to sleep in the early waking hours of night are hallmarks of mental depression, caused due to reduced serotonin levels in the brain.



It is not necessarily caused by stress in the house. It may be aggravated in the menopausal woman due to fluctuations in the hormone level . Irritability in the menopausal woman cannot be fully cured with hormones. If it is caused by hot flashes, and night sweats, hormone replacement will help. Otherwise, counseling and anti depressant medications may be needed.

Life style modifications during menopause: To cope up with menopause, assuming a healthy life style can be very useful. This includes eating in smaller quantities, exercising more, drinking lot of water, and including calcium containing diet in the food.

To conclude:

Being aware of the body changes and mental changes that can affect a woman during her menopausal years can help her breeze through this period of life and lead a peaceful and fruitful life. Changed diet and good exercise will go a long way in creating a healthy life. Doing basic investigations to detect chronic illnesses can help in starting treatment early. Hot flashes, osteoporosis, and osteoarthritis are illnesses which can be controlled with medications, and it is not necessary to suffer these illnesses silently.

