

MENOPAUSE

FACT SHEET

What is menopause?

Menopause is a natural, later life change for all women. It is the time when a woman has her last menstrual period and is no longer able to get pregnant.

When does it occur?

The average age when a woman has her last period is 51 years but for each individual woman this is very variable and unpredictable.

Stopping periods permanently before the age of 40 is unusual and you should consult your doctor if this happens.

There are many changes associated with the ceasing of periods. The time around the last period is called 'the Change', the peri-menopause or the climacteric. It usually starts to occur several years (5–10 years) before the last period and continues to happen for 1–2 years after the last period.

How do I know it is my last period?

There is no single test which can absolutely assure you that you have had your last period. Until you have gone for a year without a period you cannot be sure you have finished the menopause. So you do need to use contraception until that year has passed. Any vaginal bleeding that occurs after that 12 months needs to be discussed with your doctor.

How do I know when menopause is happening?

The basic sign of menopause approaching is irregular periods. Initially this can be periods getting heavier and often more frequent and more unpredictable. Sometimes the periods can be lighter and at wider and wider intervals.

Other signs are variable and often occur with differing intensity at different times. Most common are joint pains and stiffness, exhaustion, moodiness, depression, hot flushes and urinary or sexual problems. Many women have individual changes such as memory loss, loss of confidence, skin and hair changes, altered skin sensations, increased sensitivity to caffeine/alcohol and/or poor sleep patterns.

What is happening?

Menopause is a bit like puberty in that it is a defined physical change over several years that results, at the end of the process, in a new hormonal stage in the woman's body. Many of the changes can be related to ovaries, which stop producing eggs and hormones (oestrogen and progesterone). Women's bodies react very differently to the withdrawal of these hormones so each woman's experience of menopause is different. Sometimes your mother's or sister's experience of menopause can give you some guidance but it is rarely exactly the same process.

Why do women have a menopause?

Women are the only female animals to have a defined menopause and the age of menopause is fairly consistent for all women. Most other animals remain fertile until they get very old and then stop being fertile at different ages like men do. No one knows why women stop being fertile at around 50 years but it has been recorded in history for a long time.

How can menopausal changes affect me?

Menopause is often a tiring difficult stage of your life and may need adjustment to manage well. However, many women rejoice in not having to deal with cyclic body change and unpredictable hormonal influences as their bodies adjust to the stable post-menopausal phase.

Heavy bleeding can be helped by taking non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen, mefenamic acid, naproxen or diclofenac at an adequate daily dosage for 3–5 days when the bleeding starts. However, if your bleeding is frequent, irregular, erratic or associated with pain/having sex or other activities it is important that you get checked by your doctor. Your doctor can also prescribe other treatment for heavy bleeding, including the progestogen intra-uterine device (IUD), called Mirena.

Joint pains often respond well to NSAIDs or paracetamol. You may need to use these intermittently during the time of change and will usually find that your body adjusts gradually after the last period so you do not continue to need medication.

Sleeplessness and moodiness can be difficult to manage and may need several strategies including behavioural techniques. It is especially important, at this time, to make time for yourself and actively manage stress and/or learn relaxation techniques such as meditation or yoga. Medication can provide additional help for some women.

Sexual difficulties and urinary system problems which may occur can include dry vagina, pain during intercourse, decrease in sexual desire and urinary incontinence. These symptoms can often be helped by physiotherapy, lubrication and/or local oestrogen cream, which can be prescribed by your doctor. Talking with your partner about how you are feeling and any treatment you are having is important.

Hot flushes can be treated by oestrogen treatment (hormone therapy) though there are also several other non-hormonal medications which often help enough to make the hot flushes bearable. Hormone therapy is very effective, though it is now recommended only for short term treatment during menopause and the frequency of hot flushes is usually much reduced after menopause is completed.

There is evidence of a reduction in **bone mineral density** (described as osteoporosis or osteopaenia) after menopause, but this doesn't mean you have a significantly increased fracture risk at this age. Weight bearing exercise, not smoking, vitamin D, and a healthy diet with plenty of calcium all reduce the risk of developing osteoporosis in the future.

There is no evidence of an increase in heart disease due to menopause.

Can menopause be treated?

No, menopause itself can not be treated – it is a normal phase of women's lives like puberty.

It is both sensible and helpful to treat any of the symptoms of menopause if they are interfering with your life. Do seek help if the symptoms are distressing; your local doctor and women's health centres can be useful resources. These days most women will live many years beyond the menopause and enjoy their lives in their more stable, predictable body.

Don't forget that you still need regular Pap smears and screening mammograms until you are 70 even though you are no longer having periods.

CONTACT
SHINE SA

SHINE SA

© SHINE SA. Last updated April 2013

SHINE SA fact sheets are regularly reviewed and updated. To download the most recent version visit www.shinesa.org.au

Clinic & Counselling Appointments and General Enquiries

Tel 1300 794 584

Clinic locations and times are available at www.shinesa.org.au

Sexual Healthline

Tel 1300 883 793 **Country callers (toll free)** 1800 188 171

Talk to a sexual health nurse about any sexual health issue.

Available 9am – 12.30pm, Monday – Friday

National Relay Service

www.relayservice.gov.au

133 677 (TTY/Voice) 1300 555 727 (Speak & Listen) 0423 677 767 (SMS Relay)