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Pausing for Menopause: Taking Time Out to Understand Midlife Changes

Menopause can cause some difficult physical symptoms but the unfortunate misconceptions that surround the change are actually partly to blame for the emotional ones. The onset of menopause doesn't mean that a woman is on her way out nor does it signal the end of femininity and sexuality. The good news is that menopause can actually be extremely liberating by putting pregnancy and period problems in the past and giving many women that much needed push to live a more healthy and balanced life. The information that follows can help you understand the physical and emotional changes of menopause, discover common ways to deal with discomfort and learn how to embrace the challenges of menopausal changes.

Why and When?

Menopause is a natural turning point in a woman's life that marks the end of the menstrual cycle and childbearing years. It usually occurs, on average, at the age of 51 due to low hormone levels and reduced functioning of the ovaries because of normal aging. Hormonal imbalances, chemotherapy, radiation or a hysterectomy may also cause premature menopause.

The Stages

Because menopause happens over a few years, it typically occurs in three stages:

Premenopause. The ovaries gradually produce less estrogen in the four to five years leading up to menopause. In the last two years of premenopause, estrogen levels drop significantly. This is usually the stage where the most severe menopausal symptoms are experienced.

Menopause. Twelve months after the last period marks the official stage of menopause. At this point, the ovaries produce no progesterone, low levels of estrogen and stop releasing eggs.

Postmenopause. In the years after menopause, symptoms like hot flashes usually ease while health risks caused by decreased estrogen levels typically increase.

Signs and Symptoms

Tell-tale signs and symptoms like hot flashes and irregular periods are usually enough to let women know they're going through menopause. Other signs may include:

Physical Changes

- Bloating and weight gain
- Heart palpitations
- Insomnia and night sweats
- Headaches and migraines
- Nausea and dizziness
- Hair thinning

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Emotional Changes

- Irritability
- Mood swings
- Anxiety
- Forgetfulness
- Mild depression

Not all women encounter menopausal symptoms and the process can be very different for each person. If you're experiencing severe depression or anxiety, bleeding after menopause, or your symptoms are interfering with daily life, you should seek medical attention right away.

Complications

Low levels of estrogen are linked to a number of health problems common to older women. Postmenopausal women are more likely to suffer from:

- Osteoporosis
- Cardiac disease
- Bladder and bowel difficulties
- Vision problems
- Poor muscle power and tone

It's crucial that you stay in good contact with your doctor in the years leading up to and following menopause. Get regularly screened and checked to keep an eye on these conditions. Quitting smoking, reducing your blood pressure, regular exercise and a healthy diet will all help lower the risks for the concerns above.

Treatment

Although menopause itself requires no medical treatment, there are many ways to help relieve your symptoms and make this transition as comfortable as possible. To reduce or prevent symptoms you may try to:

Boost your hormones. Estrogen and/or progesterone replacement drugs are used to treat the difficult side effects of menopause. However, hormonal replacement therapy may or may not be right for you depending on your personal and family medical history (and there are growing risks associated with it). Other medications like low dose antidepressants, seizure pills and estrogen mimicking drugs may also reduce hot flashes. These therapies are only suggested if your symptoms are severe.

Go alternative. Acupuncture, meditation and relaxation techniques are all great, safe ways to reduce the stress of menopause. Other women swear by natural remedies like evening primrose oil, licorice, ginseng or wild yam. There is limited scientific evidence on their safety or effectiveness so talk to your doctor before trying alternative treatments.

Cool down. Try to determine what causes your hot flashes by documenting what you're doing when they strike. You may find that things like spicy food, alcohol, weather changes and hot beverages can all cause discomfort. To reduce their effects avoid triggers and always dress in layers.

Catch up on your sleep. If you've noticed that sleep has become a challenge avoid caffeine and reserve exercise for the morning. Using relaxation techniques before going to bed and sticking to a regular schedule are your best defense against insomnia. If hot flashes are disrupting your sleep, adjust the temperature in the room—by upping the air conditioner, switching on a fan or opening a window—and always sleeping with layers.

Be balanced. Eat a healthy, balanced diet low in saturated fats, sugars and oils and high in fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Make sure you're getting enough calcium and vitamin D and consider talking to your doctor about supplements.

Exercise more. Aim for at least 30 minutes of physical activity every day to protect yourself against the conditions you're more prone to after menopause and help manage weight gain. Other forms of exercise like yoga have also been proven to help limit hot flashes.

Kick the habit. Smoking not only increases your risk of heart disease, stroke, osteoporosis and cancer, it's also linked to early menopause and may increase hot flashes. Remember: it's never too late to stop.

Before selecting a type of treatment or making a dramatic change to your lifestyle, though, you should always talk to your doctor.

Be a Support

It can be really difficult to be on the outside looking in when someone you love is going through menopause. Even though it happens to all women, that doesn't make the process any easier. Try to be sympathetic and remind yourself that the physical symptoms are usually made worse by the emotional challenges that accompany them. Don't take mood swings personally. Remember that this phase of life is temporary, normal and will eventually pass with time.

In today's youth-obsessed society, a woman's perception of menopause is usually affected by many negative stereotypes. This is unfortunate because most postmenopausal women look back at this time as the beginning of many positive changes. Instead of focusing on the "losses" of menopause, why not focus on the gains? Menopause is not only a significant life change in a woman's life, it's also a great opportunity to take some time to reflect on this new life stage and renew your commitment to your physical health and emotional happiness.