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• Limit caffeine, alcohol, and stress. These things can make symptoms worse. Limiting them may help you sleep better.

• If you smoke, stop. Quitting smoking can reduce hot flashes and long-term health risks.

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All medicines for menopause symptoms have possible risks or side effects. A very small number of women develop serious health problems when taking hormone therapy. Be sure to talk to your doctor about your possible health risks before you start a treatment for menopause symptoms.

Remember, it is still possible to become pregnant until you reach menopause. To prevent an unwanted pregnancy, keep using birth control until you have not had a period for 1 full year.
What is menopause? What is perimenopause?

Menopause is the point in a woman’s life when she has not had a menstrual period for 1 year. Menopause marks the end of the childbearing years. It is sometimes called “the change of life.”

For most women, menopause happens around age 50, but every woman’s body has its own timeline. Some women stop having periods in their mid-40s. Others continue well into their 50s.

Perimenopause is the process of change that leads up to menopause. It can start as early as your late 30s or as late as your early 50s. How long perimenopause lasts varies, but it usually lasts from 2 to 8 years. You may have irregular periods or other symptoms during this time.

Menopause is a natural part of growing older. You don’t need treatment for it unless your symptoms bother you. But it’s a good idea to learn all you can about menopause. Knowing what to expect can help you stay as healthy as possible during this new phase of your life.

What causes menopause?

Normal changes in your reproductive and hormone systems cause menopause. As your egg supply ages, your body begins to ovulate less often. During this time, your hormone levels go up and down unevenly (fluctuate), causing changes in your periods and other symptoms. In time, estrogen and progesterone levels drop enough that the menstrual cycle stops.

Some medical treatments can cause your periods to stop before age 40. Having your ovaries removed, radiation therapy, or chemotherapy can trigger early menopause.

What are the symptoms?

Common symptoms include:

- Irregular periods. Some women have light periods. Others have heavy bleeding. Your menstrual cycle may be longer or shorter, or you may skip periods.
- Hot flashes.
- Trouble sleeping (insomnia).
- Emotional changes. Some women have mood swings or feel grouchy, depressed, or worried.
- Headaches.
- Feeling that your heart is beating too fast or unevenly (palpitations).
- Problems with remembering or thinking clearly.
- Vaginal dryness.

Some women have only a few mild symptoms. Others have severe symptoms that disrupt their sleep and daily lives.

Symptoms tend to last or get worse the first year or more after menopause. Over time, hormones even out at low levels, and many symptoms improve or go away. Then you can enjoy being free from periods and birth control concerns.

Do you need tests to diagnose menopause?

You don’t need to be tested to see if you have started perimenopause or reached menopause. You and your doctor will most likely be able to tell based on irregular periods and other symptoms.

If you have heavy, irregular periods, your doctor may want to do tests to rule out a serious cause of the bleeding. Heavy bleeding may be a normal sign of perimenopause. But it can also be caused by infection, disease, or a pregnancy problem.

You may not need to see your doctor about menopause symptoms. But it is important to keep up your annual physical exams. Your risks for heart disease, cancer, and bone thinning (osteoporosis) increase after menopause. At your yearly visits, your doctor can check your overall health and recommend testing as needed.

Do you need treatment?

Menopause is a natural part of growing older. You don’t need treatment for it unless your symptoms bother you. But if your symptoms are upsetting or uncomfortable, you don’t have to suffer through them. There are treatments that can help.

The first step is to have a healthy lifestyle. This can help reduce symptoms and also lower your risk of heart disease and other long-term problems related to aging.
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