



“Menopause: a wonderful time in life”

Esha Sharma¹ & Charru Jamwal²

**1. Author: Ms. Esha Sharma, Nursing Tutor, Government nursing College, Gangyal
e-mail: esha.s107@rediffmail.com**

**2. Co-Author: Ms. Charru Jamwal, Nursing Tutor, Government nursing College, Gangyal
e-mail: charrujamwal07@gmail.com**

Menopause and its management

Menopause is a normal physiological change experienced by middle aged women. Some of the menopausal symptoms experienced by these women can be severe enough to affect their normal lifestyle. Unfortunately majority of those women are not aware of the changes brought about by menopause (Lu *et al.*, 2007 and Rahman *et al.*, 2010). It was also noted in some postmenopausal women with long term estrogen deficiency, changes to the cardiovascular or bone which leads to osteoporosis. It is well documented that menopausal symptoms experienced by women affect their quality of life (Dhillon *et al.*, 2006).

Menopause literally means the "end of monthly cycles" (the end of monthly periods or menstruation), from the Greek word *pausis* ("pause") and *mēn* ("month"). The word "menopause" was coined specifically for human females, where the end of fertility is traditionally indicated by the permanent stopping of monthly menstruations. However, menopause exists in some other animals, many of which do not have monthly menstruation; in this case, the term means a natural end to fertility that occurs before the end of the natural lifespan.

According to the World Health Organization, menopause is the permanent termination of menstruation as a result of the cessation of ovarian activity. The climacteric phase is characterized by a decrease in ovarian activity, decay in probable fertility, and the manifestation of various symptoms along with irregular intervals of menstruation. Menopause is defined as the permanent cessation of menses resulting from reduced ovarian hormone secretion that occurs naturally or is induced by surgery, chemotherapy, or radiation. Natural menopause is recognized after 12 months of amenorrhea that is not associated with a pathologic cause (Rahman *et al.*, 2010). Menopause is a physiological event in the women's life. The cultural context within which a woman lives can have a significant impact on the way she experiences the menopausal transition. Menopause has been described as a subjective experience, with social and cultural factors playing a prominent role in the way menopause is experienced and perceived. It is caused by aging of ovaries which leads to decline in the production of ovarian Gonadotrophins,

Estrogen and Progesterone. The deficiency of these hormones elicits various somatic, vasomotor, sexual and psychological symptoms that impair the overall quality of life of women (Dennerstein *et al.*, 2000 and Deeks & McCabe, 2004). The period covers a fragment of pre menopause and the parts of peri- and post-menopause, up until ancient age. There are three stages of menopause: perimenopause, menopause and postmenopause.

- **Perimenopause** is the time leading up to menopause. It describes a time when hormones start to decline and menstrual cycles become erratic and irregular. The women may start to experience side effects of menopause, like hot flashes or vaginal dryness.
- **Menopause** occurs when you've stopped producing the hormones that cause your menstrual period and have gone without a period for 12 months in a row. Once this has occurred, women enter postmenopause.
- **Postmenopause** is the time after menopause has occurred. Once this happens, women are in postmenopause for the rest of your life. People in postmenopause are at an increased risk for certain health conditions like osteoporosis and heart disease.

Menopause brings about the transition in a woman's life leading to changes in both the physical and psychological aspects affecting the quality of life (QOL). The transition into menopause is related to different physical and mental changes that may affect women's health. The average age of attainment of menopause is around 48 years. In India, women attain menopause at an average age of 45 to 50 years. The World Health Organization (1993) defines QoL as an individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and the value system in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns can be applied to menopausal women. Quality of life is an important outcome measure of health care, and understanding the impact of menopause on quality of life is a critically important part of the care of symptomatic postmenopausal women. Hence menopausal health demands attention in India. Studies show that the physical, psychological, social, and sexual changes in menopause have an adverse effect on women's quality of life. It has been expressed that 96% of women have menopausal complaints and their quality of life is affected not only physically and psychologically but also socially. It is reported that the quality of life of women is especially adversely affected in the perimenopausal and early postmenopausal periods.

Also, the WHO identified four broad domains as being universally relevant for the quality of life, namely physical health, psychological well-being, social relationships, and environment (Hendry & McVittie, 2004 and Pensri *et al.*, 2007). During this period women can experience many symptoms including hot flashes, night sweats, sleep and mood disorders, impaired memory, lack of concentration, nervousness, depression, insomnia, bone and joint complaints, and reduction of muscle mass. The duration, severity, and impact of these symptoms vary extremely from person to person, and population to population.

The menopause has been reported as one of the opportunities for women, to visit health-care services (Guthrie *et al.*, 2003). The health care of women during this stage requires special attention to the identification of their health needs in order to provide competent care (Gharaibeh *et al.*, 2010).

Health risks associated with postmenopause

People in postmenopause are at an increased risk for several conditions:

Cardiovascular disease: Estrogen helps protect against cardiovascular diseases like heart attack, heart disease and stroke. It is also common for people in post menopause to become more sedentary, which contributes to high cholesterol and high blood pressure. These factors combined can increase a woman's risk for cardiovascular diseases after menopause. A healthy diet, not smoking and getting regular exercise are your best options to prevent heart disease. Treating elevated blood pressure and diabetes as well as maintaining cholesterol levels are also ways to lower your risk.

Osteoporosis: People lose bone more rapidly after menopause due to decreased levels of estrogen. You may lose up to 25% of your bone density after menopause (approximately 1% to 2% per year). When too much bone is lost, it increases your risk of developing osteoporosis and bone fractures. The bones of the hip, wrist, and spine are most commonly affected. Bone mineral density testing, also called bone densitometry, can be done to see how much calcium you have in certain parts of your bones. The test is used to detect osteoporosis and osteopenia, a precursor to osteoporosis.

Vaginal atrophy: Decreased estrogen levels cause the tissues in your vagina to thin and deteriorate, making your vagina dry. People in post menopause may continue to struggle with vaginal dryness for years after their last period. Using vaginal lubricants can help ease any discomfort caused by sex. Decreased estrogen levels can also impact the urinary tract and bladder and make leaking urine a problem for some people. Persistent dryness and painful intercourse should be evaluated by your healthcare provider to rule out other conditions. Using lubrication and topical creams or getting laser therapy to the vagina can help with vaginal dryness.

Mental health issues: Many people in post menopause experience moodiness, anxiety and depression. This could be caused by stress, sexual tension or other life challenges that occur during this time. Some people feel sad that their reproductive years are over. Mood symptoms can also be caused by decreased hormone levels. It might help to talk with a therapist or counselor about what you are feeling.

Tips for a healthy transition

Staying healthy and attending to bothersome symptoms can help ease the menopause transition. It's also important to manage the increased risk for heart disease and osteoporosis that comes with menopause. Take care to:

- Quit smoking or using tobacco products, if you currently do.
- Eat a healthy diet, low in fat, high in fiber, with plenty of fruits, vegetables, and whole-grain foods.
- Make sure you get enough calcium and vitamin D.

- Learn what your healthy weight is, and try to stay there.
- Do weight-bearing exercise, such as climbing stairs or dancing, at least 3 days each week for healthy bones. Try to be physically active in other ways for your general health, too.
- Exercise daily to lift mood, reduce stress and inflammation, lose excess weight (particularly weight around the middle), and widen your thermoregulatory zone in your brain, which makes body temperature fluctuations more comfortable, thereby decreasing the severity of hot flashes. For bone health, include weight-bearing activities like walking, running, calisthenics, and/or dancing, as well as resistance training such as weights, bands, and/or isometrics. Resistance training also helps to slim stubborn belly fat as well as maintain strength and balance, which naturally decline during the aging process.
- Avoid hot flash triggers such as alcohol. More than four drinks per week can also increase your breast cancer risk, even if you have NO family history.
- Wear layered clothes to help decrease exposure to heat.
- Lose weight and trim abdominal circumference (measured at belly button). Aim for a body mass index (BMI) less than 25 and an abdominal circumference less than 35 inches, preferably less than 33 inches. Body composition should be less than 32% fat, and optimally less than 25% fat. Remember: Our body fat makes steroids like animal estrogen, which may increase our cancer risk, so losing fat not only decreases body warmth, it also decreases our future risk of disease.
- Decrease frequency/portion size of animal products (aim for no more than 4 ounces daily) and, if possible, avoid restaurant or store-bought animal products that contain animal steroid hormones. These hormones may trigger hot flashes in some women.
- Follow the Eating Plan, which is low in total fat and saturated fat, moderate in omega-3 fatty acids, low in sodium, and rich in healthful, nutrient-dense, fiber-filled foods like fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and beans.
- If not following the recommendations for nutrition because you're eating processed food and not getting 8 to 10 servings of fruits and vegetables daily, consider supplementing with multivitamins and extra calcium as indicated by your specific blood and bone tests.
- Check vitamin D level biannually (at summer's end in September and winter's end in March) with an optimal level of 50 to 60 for cancer prevention, and bone and immune health. Experts suggest that most of us need at least 2000 IUs of non prescription vitamin D-3 per day for our best health.
- Get bone mineral density tests at least every 2 years and annually if considering medication.
- Control your blood pressure with a goal of <120/< 80. Maintaining a healthy blood pressure may decrease your risk of memory loss as well as heart, brain, eye, and kidney disease.
- Monitor your cycle and correlate symptoms to increase your sense of control, reduce stress, and help you make appropriate lifestyle and/or medication adjustments.

- Practice healthy stress relief daily, such as enjoyable activity, yoga, stretching, quiet time, deep breathing, prayer, meditation, and writing in a journal, all of which have significant health benefits in menopause and beyond.
- Visit doctor regularly to monitor the cardiovascular risk factors. Follow blood pressure, cholesterol, blood sugar, thyroid, CRP and carotid artery ultrasound to screen for the early stages of cardiovascular disease.
- Continue routine screenings such as monthly self-breast exams, annual doctor-administered breast exams, and mammogram and /or ultrasounds, colonoscopy exams periodically, and annual pap smears and pelvic exams. Even if women had a hysterectomy or oophorectomy, it is wise to check the health of this area at least every two years. Also recommended is a full body skin examination by a dermatologist for skin cancer prevention as well as regular sunscreen use.
- Remember that medication is often just a stepping stone to decrease your risk of long-term tissue damage while you are learning to maintain the healthy lifestyle changes to reverse your condition or disease.

Finally, always keep in mind that menopause is not a disease but a normal life transition. Once women had an entire year without any period, she has arrived at postmenopause, which is a wonderful time in life. If you experience any postmenopausal bleeding, notify the gynaecologist as this is not normal and needs further evaluation promptly.

Natural ways to reduce the symptoms of menopause

1. Eat foods rich in calcium and vitamin D: Hormonal changes during menopause can cause bones to weaken, increasing the risk of osteoporosis. Calcium and vitamin D are linked to good bone health, so it's important to get enough of these nutrients in your diet. Adequate vitamin D intake during postmenopause is also associated with a lower risk of hip fractures from weak bones. Many foods are calcium-rich, including dairy products like yogurt, milk, and cheese. Green, leafy vegetables such as kale, collard greens, and spinach have lots of calcium too. It's also plentiful in tofu, beans, sardines, and other foods. Additionally, calcium-fortified foods are also good sources, including certain cereals, fruit juice, or milk alternatives. Sunlight is main source of vitamin D, since skin produces it when exposed to the sun. However, as we get older, skin gets less efficient at making it, so either taking a supplement or increasing food sources of vitamin D may be important. Rich dietary sources include oily fish, eggs, cod liver oil, and foods fortified with vitamin D.

2. Maintain a moderate weight: It's common to gain weight during menopause. This can be due to a combination of changing hormones, aging, lifestyle, and genetics. Gaining excess body fat, especially around the waist, increases the risk of developing diseases such as heart disease and diabetes. In addition, body weight may affect menopause symptoms. One study of 17,473 postmenopausal women found that those who lost at least 10 pounds (4.5 kg) of weight or 10% of their body weight over a year were more likely to eliminate hot flashes and night sweats.

3. Eat lots of fruit and vegetables: A diet rich in fruits and vegetables can help prevent a number of menopause symptoms. Fruits and veggies are low in calories and can help you feel full, so they're great for weight loss and weight maintenance. They may also help prevent a number of diseases, including heart disease. This is important, since heart disease risk tends to increase after menopause. This could be due to factors such as age, weight gain, or possibly reduced estrogen levels. Finally, fruits and vegetables may also help prevent bone loss. One observational study of 3,236 women ages 50 to 59 found that diets high in fruit and vegetables may lead to less bone breakdown.

4. Avoid trigger foods: Certain foods may trigger hot flashes, night sweats, and mood changes. They may be even more likely to be triggers when eaten at night. Common triggers include caffeine, alcohol, and foods that are sugary or spicy. Keep a symptom diary. If feel that particular foods trigger menopause symptoms, try to reduce the consumption or avoid them completely.

5. Exercise regularly: There is currently not enough evidence to confirm whether exercise is effective for treating hot flashes and night sweats. However, there is evidence to support other benefits of regular exercise, such as Pilates-based exercise programs. These benefits include improved energy and metabolism, healthier joints and bones, decreased stress, and better sleep. For example, a study in Korea that looked at the effects of a 12-week walking exercise program found that the exercise improved physical and mental health and overall quality of life in a group of 40 menopausal women. Regular exercise is also associated with better overall health and protection against diseases and conditions including cancer, heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, obesity, and osteoporosis. Menopausal people have a notable increase in heart disease risk; several studies show that regular exercise may help reduce this risk.

6. Eat more foods that are high in phytoestrogens: Phytoestrogens are naturally occurring plant compounds that can mimic the effects of estrogen in the body. Therefore, they may help balance hormones. The high intake of phytoestrogens in Asian countries such as Japan is thought to be the reason why menopausal people in these places rarely experience hot flashes. Foods rich in phytoestrogens include: soybeans and soy products, tofu, flaxseeds, linseeds, sesame seeds, beans. However, the phytoestrogen content in foods varies depending on processing methods. One study found that diets high in soy were associated with reduced cholesterol levels, blood pressure, and reduced severity of hot flashes and night sweats among women participants who were starting to enter menopause. However, the debate continues over whether soy products are good or bad for health. Evidence suggests that real food sources of phytoestrogens are better than supplements or processed foods with added soy protein.

7. Drink enough water: During menopause, dryness is often an issue. This is likely caused by the decrease in estrogen levels. Drinking 8 to 12 glasses of water a day can help with these symptoms. Drinking water can also reduce the bloating that can occur with hormonal changes. In addition, water can help prevent weight gain and

aid in weight loss by helping you feel full and increasing metabolism slightly. Drinking 17 ounces (500 ml) of water, 30 minutes before a meal, may lead you to consume 13% fewer calories during the meal.

8. Reduce refined sugar and processed foods: A diet high in refined carbs and sugar can cause sharp rises and dips in blood sugar, making you feel tired and irritable. This may worsen the physical and mental symptoms of menopause. In fact, one study found that diets high in refined carbohydrates may increase the risk of depression in postmenopausal women. Diets high in processed foods may also affect bone health, especially if these foods are replacing the nutrients we need from a daily balanced diet. A large observational study found that among women ages 50 to 59, diets high in processed and snack foods were associated with poor bone quality.

9. Don't skip meals: Eating regular meals may be important when you're going through menopause. Irregular eating may make certain symptoms of menopause worse and make weight management more difficult. A yearlong weight management program for postmenopausal women found that skipping meals was associated with 4.3% less weight loss.

10. Eat protein-rich foods: Regularly eating protein throughout the day can help prevent the loss of lean muscle mass that occurs with age. One study found that consuming protein throughout the day at each meal may slow down muscle loss due to aging. In addition to helping prevent muscle loss, high protein diets can help with weight loss because they enhance fullness and increase the number of calories burned. Foods rich in protein include meat, fish, eggs, legumes, nuts, and dairy.

11. Take natural supplements: Many people may consider taking natural products and remedies to relieve their menopause symptoms. So, the most common natural supplements for reducing symptoms of menopause:

- **Phytoestrogens.** These can be consumed through natural food sources or supplements. There is currently not enough evidence to recommend them for alleviating menopause symptoms.
- **Black cohosh.** Although some studies found that black cohosh may effectively alleviate hot flashes, the evidence is mixed. In addition, there is a lack of long-term data on the safety of this supplement.
- **Red clover.** A review of studies found that red clover isoflavone supplements may help reduce the daily frequency of hot flashes from a baseline of three per day. However, study authors noted that more specific research is needed to confirm the effects of red clover on relieving flushing episodes and other menopause symptoms.
- **Other supplements.** More research is needed on the effectiveness of other commonly used supplements such as probiotics, prebiotics, cranberry extract, kava, DHEA-S, and evening primrose oil to help alleviate menopause symptoms such as hot flashes and night sweats.

Conclusion: Menopause is not an illness. It's a natural part of life. Though its symptoms can be difficult to deal with, eating the right diet and exercising regularly may help alleviate and prevent them.

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