



Female menopausal symptoms after cancer treatment

Some cancer treatments such as chemotherapy and hormone therapy can cause an early or premature menopause for women. Menopause means the end of a woman's ability to have children. Women no longer ovulate (release eggs) or have periods.

Going through menopause means you are likely to have menopausal symptoms such as hot flushes, sweats, weight changes, a dry vagina and mood changes. Women often find these symptoms upsetting and very challenging. Many women need extra support during this difficult time. Fortunately there is plenty of help for women who go through menopause due to their cancer treatment.

This fact sheet aims to provide information about female menopausal symptoms during and after cancer treatment, how they can affect you and what can be done to help you cope. The information does not replace talking to your doctors or nurses. It aims to act as a tool to help you prepare questions you can ask your healthcare team.

About normal menopause

You may hear the term menopause being called “the change of life”. This is because it marks a time in a women's life when their body goes through many physical and emotional changes. Menopause is a normal part of getting older. Most women will go through menopause between the ages of 45 and 55. For some it may begin earlier but the average age is around 51.

When you reach menopause your periods stop. This is because your ovaries stop producing oestrogen and releasing eggs each month. The drop in oestrogen levels in your body can cause ‘menopausal symptoms’. It can take months or a few years to completely go



through menopause. Some women say the changes happen slowly. For others it can be abrupt and symptoms such as hot flushes can start suddenly. Menopause can be a very unsettling time for some women. You may have to cope with some quite harsh symptoms. Others go through it without too many problems. It is difficult to predict how menopause will affect each individual woman.

Menopause during and after cancer treatment

Women having cancer treatment may go through a premature or early menopause. This may be temporary or permanent. Premature menopause happens before the age of 40, whilst early menopause happens in women between the ages of 41 and 45. For some women either situation can be very difficult to cope with, especially if they want to start a family or add to their existing family.

Once treatment is over you may begin ovulating and menstruating again. This could take months or sometimes years. However, for some women the change will be permanent. Treatments that can cause menopause to happen include:

- Chemotherapy (drugs given to slow the growth or kill cancer cells)
- Hormone (endocrine) therapy (drugs such as Tamoxifen and Arimidex given to stop hormone production)
- Surgery to remove ovaries that stops the production of hormones
- Surgery to remove the uterus (hysterectomy)
- Radiotherapy (directly at or around both ovaries)



Premature ovarian insufficiency (POI)

Some women may go through an early menopause (called premature ovarian insufficiency or POI). You may also hear this being called premature ovarian failure (POF). This means periods no longer happen because the ovaries have been damaged by the cancer or cancer treatment. Ovulation is rare, so pregnancy is rare too. Around 5% of women with POI can unexpectedly get pregnant due to the occasional egg being present and ovulating. So if pregnancy is actually not desired, contraception needs to be discussed with your doctor.

Symptoms of menopause

The most common symptoms during menopause are hot flashes, night sweats, tiredness, vaginal dryness and low sex drive (libido). However, there are many other symptoms that can happen which include:

- Irregular periods
- Painful sex due to dry vagina
- Dry and/or itchy skin
- Tingling or crawling sensation under the skin
- Brittle nails
- Anxiety/panic disorders
- Sleep disturbances
- Urinary incontinence when coughing or sneezing or urinary frequency
- Low mood, feelings of sadness, anger and even depression
- Low self esteem
- Mood swings, irritability
- Hair loss
- Lack of concentration and forgetfulness
- Breast tenderness/pain



- Headaches and dizziness
- Stomach problems such as bloating, constipation and excessive gas
- Joint pain and muscle tension

Not everyone will have all the symptoms mentioned. You may only experience a couple of them. Late side effects of menopause can include bone thinning (osteoporosis) and an increase in the risk of heart problems and having a stroke.

Learning about your symptoms and getting support from your medical team can help women understand what is happening to their body. It allows them to better deal with their menopause.

Treating your symptoms

There are many sources of information available to women about the changes to your body during menopause. Credible websites, booklets and organisations specialising in women's health will all be able to offer answers your questions. Your GP and practice nurse are also a good source of information and support.

Some symptoms are harder to manage than others but there is usually something that can be done to help ease most menopausal symptoms.

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT)

HRT may be suitable for some women to take to help reduce many of the unpleasant menopausal symptoms. However, doctors do not recommend taking HRT after breast cancer. This is because research has proven that HRT can increase the chance of a breast cancer returning. It can also increase the risk of getting another breast cancer. In women with very severe symptoms some doctors may



prescribe HRT to a woman with a history of breast cancer. But you would need to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of HRT with your doctor.

Lifestyle changes

Many of the symptoms associated with menopause, can be eased by making changes to your everyday life. For example, eating a healthy diet, avoiding too much alcohol, not smoking, getting plenty of regular exercise and trying to keep a positive and happy outlook on life. See tips on coping below for further ideas.

Natural therapies

There is a huge market advertising natural herbs, vitamin supplements and other products to help women cope with menopause. Whilst some may be helpful it is important to be careful not to become vulnerable to false advertising. Many products may look good but they can be expensive and not really help at all. In fact some herbal preparations can have unpleasant and possibly harmful side effects. It is important to discuss any natural products you are taking or would like to take with your doctor. It is particularly important to tell your cancer doctors if you are using any herbs, vitamins or other supplements. Some products are known to interfere with chemotherapy.

Using natural therapies such as massage, yoga, acupuncture, tai chi, counselling and other relaxation techniques can be very beneficial to some women going through menopause. They can help ease the stress and allow you to cope better.



Tips on coping with specific symptoms

Hot flushes and night sweats

Many women say one of the hardest menopausal symptoms to cope with is the hot flushes and night sweats. During a hot flush there is a sudden wave of heat across the top of your body. You can feel very hot, flustered, restless, anxious and even nauseated.

The following suggestions can help to reduce the amount and severity of these symptoms.

- Maintaining a nutritious diet full of lots of fresh fruit and vegetables
- Exercise at least three times a week for half an hour or more
- Drink plenty of water
- Find time to rest and relax each day
- Keep the window in your room open or a fan on to keep the air cool
- Cool sponge or shower yourself before going to bed
- Wear cool, light cotton or silk clothing and night wear
- Keep a cool water atomiser in your handbag to spray your face during a hot flush
- Keep alcohol to a limit
- Avoid caffeine and nicotine
- Always keep cool/icy drinks close by to sip when you feel hot
- If night sweats are a problem lie on a towel at night to help absorb moisture and change as necessary
- Ask your doctor about several drugs that may help hot flushes (progestagens, gabapentin and some anti-depressants)



Sleep changes

During menopause you may find it either difficult to get to sleep or you may suffer disrupted sleep patterns due to symptoms. Night sweats, anxiety and pain can wake you up. Lack of sleep causes tiredness and low mood. If you are having problems with sleep you may like to try some of the following:

- Take a relaxing bath just before bed
- Warm milk or herbal teas before bed
- Wear light weight and cool sleep wear
- Keep a window open in your room
- Meditation and relaxation techniques such as yoga or meditation CD's/books
- Speak with your doctor if lack of sleep is making you very anxious

Sexuality problems

If you have a partner, discuss with them how you are feeling about your sexuality. This allows them to know what is happening and why sexual intimacy may be difficult at times. It can prevent them feeling rejected. It may allow you to still feel close with kissing and cuddles, without being concerned that it needs to end in sexual intercourse. If things get very difficult you may benefit from some sexual counselling. For further help go to the section on [Where to get further help and information](#).



Vaginal dryness

If you and your partner do want to have sex you may like to use certain products designed to help lubricate the vagina. For example, KY jelly or Sylk which is a natural intimate moisturiser. Some women may be able to use creams or pessaries containing oestrogen. But you would need to discuss with your cancer doctor first. Although very little oestrogen will be absorbed through the skin it still may not be suitable for women who have had breast cancer.

Bone thinning

If you have had a cancer treatment that lowers your oestrogen levels or brings on an early menopause then you may be at a higher risk of bone thinning (osteoporosis). Treatments causing this can include chemotherapy, hormone therapy drugs (LHRH analogues and aromatase inhibitors). Removal of your ovaries before your natural menopause will also affect oestrogen levels.

Your doctor may do a special scan to check your bone density. It is called a DEXA scan. Your doctor will also advise you to keep up regular weight bearing exercises such as running, walking, cycling, gym work and most team sports. Putting pressure on your bones during this type of exercise is the only way to strengthen your bones. There are also medications that some women can take to help strengthen their bones. Ask your doctor if these are suitable for you.

Your feelings

Going through menopause can be a very emotional experience. Some say it is a bit like being on a roller coaster. Some days you feel OK and others you may feel very low in mood. You may wonder what is going



on and if you will ever feel normal again. Talk to your close friends and family about how you feel. Knowing other women go through similar experiences during menopause can help. Your doctors and nurses can also be a great source of information and support.

Do not underestimate confiding in someone going through a similar experience to you! Most women find menopause a very tricky and emotional time. Just chatting with other women will help you know you are not alone. It might not change things too much but it can definitely make you feel less anxious. Good friends and cancer support groups can provide you with an enormous amount of help.

Some feelings of sadness, anxiety and loneliness are normal during menopause. However, if these symptoms persist and you feel your mood is very low and difficult to change it is important to see your doctor. You may be suffering from depression. There is a lot that can be done to help treat depression but you need to let someone know.

The sooner you get help the easier it will be to treat. Depression is not a weakness. It is a common medical condition that needs treatment.

Having a baby after cancer treatment

Going through menopause at a stage in your life when you still want to have children can be devastating for some women. We have a separate fact sheet called '[Having a baby after cancer treatment](#)' that will provide you with information and support on this issue.



Where to get further help and information

This fact sheet only provides an overview of menopausal symptoms during and after cancer treatment. It is important you find out as much as you can for your individual situation. For more detailed information please refer to our other fact sheets and the following excellent resources:

- Other fact sheets from the Future Fertility website
www.futurefertility.com.au or www.futurefertility.com.nz
- BREAST Cancer Network Australia (BCNA) booklet: Menopause and Breast Cancer
(www.bcna.org.au/sites/default/files/menopause_booklet.pdf)
- Jean Hailes for Women's Health
(<http://www.earlymenopause.org.au>) Tel. 1800 JEAN HAILES (532 642)
- The Australasian Menopause Society (www.menopause.org.au)
- The NZ Early Menopause Support Group
(www.earlymenopause.org.nz)

You may also like to call a Cancer Helpline service:

- Australia 13 11 20
- New Zealand call 0800 226 237

Both these help lines will allow you to speak with an experienced cancer nurse.