

MENOPAUSE



A guide to understanding the menopause

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About this booklet

The aim of this booklet is to help answer some of the questions women may have about the menopause. It explains what the menopause is, what can be expected with menopause, and provides information about how to manage some of the symptoms that women may experience.

This booklet was developed in collaboration with South African women who advised us on what information should be included and helped us to design it. We also worked closely with researchers, healthcare professionals and menopause specialists.

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If you would like more information about the menopause, please visit the South African Menopause Society (SAMS) website at

<https://www.menopause.co.za/>

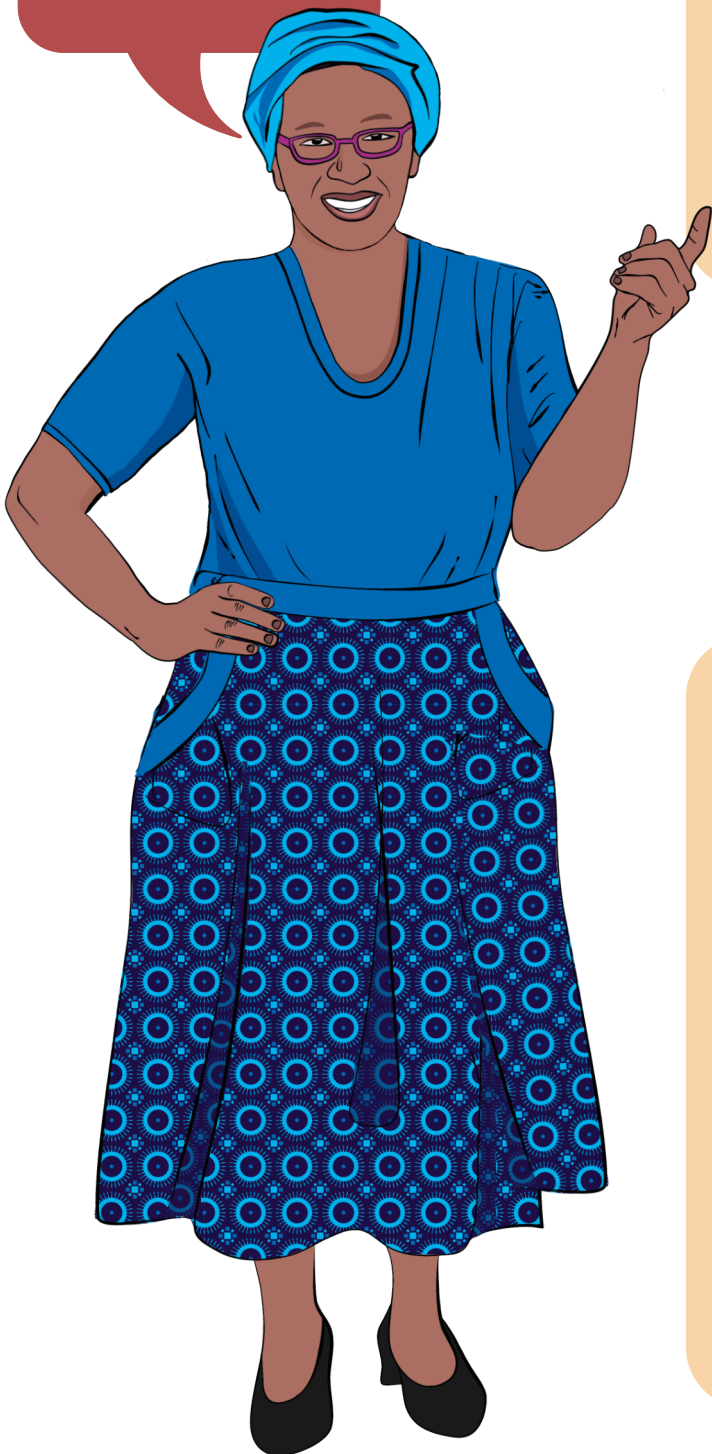
A guide to understanding the menopause

What is the menopause?

The menopause is when a woman no longer has her periods. It is the last day of a woman's last period ever and when she has gone for 12 months (1 year) without any period at all. Some women call it the 'change of life'. It is a normal part of getting older and happens to every woman.

What causes the menopause?

Menopause is caused by changes in the hormones in your body. Hormones are chemicals produced by the body that signal to organs and tissues to tell them what to do. From the first time you had your period, these hormones have helped you have regular periods every month and have caused ovulation (when an egg from your ovaries inside your body, is released each month so that you can have a baby). When you reach menopause (remember, this is 12 months after your last menstrual period) your ovaries no longer release an egg every month, so you can't become pregnant anymore.



What happens when you are in menopause?

You don't usually become menopausal suddenly, it can happen slowly. In the time leading up to menopause your hormones start to rise and fall causing some changes in your body that you may or may not be aware of. The time when you are moving towards menopause is called the 'perimenopause', or the menopause transition, and you may notice some physical and emotional changes happening to you.

In perimenopause you will notice that your periods start to change. These changes are often different in each woman. Sometimes you will miss a period for a month or two and then they start again, sometimes periods are much heavier than usual or much lighter. These changes can carry on for a few months or even years before periods stop completely. In some women periods can just stop suddenly. Every woman's experience is different.

How do you know when you are in menopause?

If you are in your mid-40's or older and haven't had a period at all for 12 months in a row you can usually be confident that you are in menopause. However, certain things such as losing too much weight, lots of stress and unhealthy lifestyle habits like smoking and drinking too much alcohol, can also cause your periods to stop. So be aware if there are other reasons for your periods to stop or change. It is important to know that menopause symptoms can be similar to some changes caused by certain health problems that may **not** be caused by your ovaries getting older, so it's good to be aware of these. If you don't think that the reason for these health issues and symptoms is because you are moving towards your menopause, you should talk to your doctor or clinic sister. They might refer you to a gynaecologist who may do some blood tests to help confirm whether you have reached menopause or have a health problem.

**What symptoms
can you get with
the menopause?**

Most women will experience some menopausal symptoms. These will probably start some time before you have your last period. These symptoms can be uncomfortable and sometimes very troublesome. Symptoms include:

- Hot flushes (suddenly feeling very hot) on the face, neck and chest along with night sweats
- Tender breasts.
- Irritability and emotional feelings
- Memory problems (forgetting things or not concentrating well)
- Mood problems (feeling anxious or depressed)
- Battling to sleep well or to stay asleep
- Weight gain
- Muscle and joint pains
- Dryness of the vagina and eyes

Perimenopause can last up to 9 years. All women are different, so how you experience menopause may not be the same as your friends. Although you and many other women may struggle in the years leading up to menopause, some women have no problems at all. Once you are fully into menopause the hot flushes and other symptoms usually stop although some women, especially those women who experience a sudden menopause due to having an operation to remove their womb or who receive certain medicines that are only used sometimes for specific illnesses, may experience symptoms into their 80's. Most women get a dry vagina which may cause sex to be uncomfortable or painful. A low sex drive (not wanting to have sex) is also common and some women experience urinary problems (pain when urinating or urinary infections) after they have reached the menopause.

**How do
women's
bodies
change when
they go
through the
menopause?**

The changes in your hormones can cause changes to your body. In the time leading up to the menopause your breasts can often feel bigger and sometimes very tender. It becomes easier to put on weight, and at this time, some women also eat unhealthy food when they are feeling anxious or depressed to make them feel better. But this feeling doesn't last long, and you may feel even more depressed if you are overweight. The information below will explain how you can maintain a healthy weight during menopause. You may also find that you lose some hair and some women find that they grow hair on their faces. You may also find that your eyes feel dryer.

What can you do to manage symptoms?

Dealing with hot flushes and night sweats

- Wear loose comfortable clothes that are made only of cotton, so that the fabric breathes.
- Wear layers so you can take something off if you get too hot.
- Carry a small spray bottle of water and spray it on the back of your neck and wrists and knees when you feel a hot flush coming on. Keep one next to your bed at night.
- Don't have spicy food like curry, or very hot food and soup. Drink tea or coffee at room temperature.
- Don't overeat or drink too much alcohol or caffeinated drinks like coffee.
- Don't smoke.
- Exercise regularly or be as physically active as possible.
- Stress can make you have a hot flush, so try to relax and stay calm.
- If you feel stressed practice breathing calmly. Breathe in through your nose with your mouth closed for four counts. Hold the breath for four counts and let it out slowly through your mouth for four counts. Repeat this for a minute or two.

Dealing with weight gain

- Eating a healthy diet and being physically active are very important. See below for more information on this.

Dealing with uncomfortable sex

- If sex is uncomfortable, there are creams and moisturizers that sometimes help with vaginal dryness. Lubricants (gels) can also help to make sex more comfortable. These can be bought from local pharmacies. Please note these must not have any perfumes or flavourings. Please do not use household products such as cooking oil or Vaseline. This is because they may cause infection and damage condoms if you are using them.
- Doctors can also prescribe estrogen cream that can be applied to a dry vagina. This can be used twice a week to relieve painful sex due to menopause.

Hormone Therapy

- Hormone Therapy (HT) is the most effective treatment if you are really battling with symptoms such as hot flushes. Your doctor will advise you of the risks and benefits. If you take HT, you must have a thorough medical examination and then an annual gynaecological examination and a mammogram. Tell your doctor your family and medical history. Take the smallest, effective amount of HT for the shortest possible time. Each year check with your doctor to see whether you still need to use it.
- For women who can't take HT, there are sometimes other treatments. Ask your doctor or clinic sister about these.

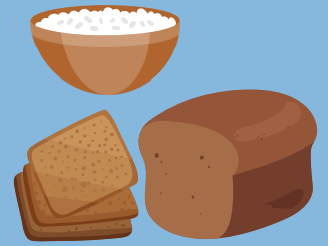
How should women look after themselves as they enter midlife?

As many women put on some weight, it is very important to watch what you eat and have a healthy diet. To do this you should aim to:



Fresh fruit and vegetables are low in fat and contain lots of essential vitamins and minerals.

Brown foods are good for your heart and help you stay healthy. These include oats, brown rice, Mabela and brown bread.



Calcium helps to keep your bones strong and is very important for women in menopause. These include dairy, e.g. milk and yoghurt, bony fish e.g. sardines and pilchards, and green leafy vegetables like spinach.



Protein helps you to build muscle and stay strong. Foods that contain protein include beans and peas, sugar free peanut butter, fish, chicken and meat e.g. lamb or beef.

Only eat as much food as you need: It is important that you only eat as much as you need to stay healthy and active. If you eat more than this you will gain weight, even if the food is healthy.



Eat less 'white' starchy foods: White starchy foods are not as healthy as brown foods. These white starchy foods include white pap, white rice and white bread.



Fat is an important part of your diet. Healthy fats include avocados, canola oil and olive oil. But you should try to avoid eating too much unhealthy fat found in cakes, biscuits, pastries and butter, as these may make you gain weight.



Cut down on sugary foods, sweets and drinks: They are not healthy and make you gain weight. It can be hard to give up sweet things but begin by gradually having less sugar in your tea or coffee and you will get used to having less sugar and still enjoy your hot drink.



Eat less salt: Salt is one of the main causes of high blood pressure. To reduce your salt, try to eat fewer salty snacks like chips and avoid adding salt to your cooking and meals.

Drink plenty of water: Drink at least 6 glasses of water daily.



Stay active: It is important to be as physically active as you can, and try not to sit for long periods of time. You should aim to do at least 3 hours of moderate or vigorous intensity physical activity each week. This includes brisk walking, dancing and busy housework. If you are not used to being physically active, start slowly and build up to doing more gradually. Regular exercise can help you sleep better.



Each month when you are a young woman, the hormones in your body make your womb ready in case you get pregnant. They do this by building up the womb lining. If you don't get pregnant the womb lining bleeds away and the blood comes out through your vagina. After each period the womb gets ready again, just in case you might get pregnant, and this goes on every month until you reach menopause. When you can no longer get pregnant (because your ovaries stop releasing an egg each month), the womb doesn't need to prepare for pregnancy, and no lining is built and you don't bleed anymore. It is important to remember that if you have not bled at all for 12 months and then start to bleed again, even if it is a small amount of blood, then you must see your clinic sister and/or doctor.

What happens to the blood from your period when you go through the menopause?

At what age do women go through the menopause?

The menopause is a natural part of getting older and can happen between 45 and 55 years of age. The average age for a woman to reach the menopause is around 50 years old.

Why is age at menopause different for different women?

All women are different and just as you started your periods at an earlier or later age than your friends, you may have your menopause earlier or later than other women you know. Several things can affect the age at which you will become menopausal. The most important is the age at which your mother reached menopause, so you will probably become menopausal around the same time. But this is not always true, and there are other factors that can affect your age at menopause. These include certain illnesses and health conditions, some medications, treatment for cancers, and also your lifestyle. Smoking is a reason why some women have an earlier menopause, because smoking can damage your ovaries so they don't work as well as they should. So if you smoke but your mother didn't it is likely that you will reach menopause earlier than she did. If you are very, very thin your periods may stop, and you may have an early (premature) menopause.

Can going through the menopause affect your sex life?

When you become menopausal, changes in hormones may mean that you may feel less desire for sex. In addition, a dry vagina can make sex uncomfortable and sometimes painful. However, there are helpful treatments for a dry vagina, and sexual desire may improve when your menopausal symptoms become less severe.

Can you still get pregnant when you are going through the menopause?

When you have finally reached the menopause (at least one year after your last period) you can no longer get pregnant. But if you do not want to have a baby, be careful not to become pregnant by mistake. Even if your periods are not regular when you are getting older, you can still become pregnant. Until you are absolutely sure that you haven't had a single period for at least 12 months, you should still use contraception during sex if you do not want to get pregnant.

Can menopause cause health problems such as cancer?

No. However, it is always important to be responsible for your health. Always report any unusual symptoms to your clinic sister and/or doctor.



Can the
menopause
affect my
bones?

Changes in hormones affect your bones, and after the menopause your bones can break more easily, such as breaking a wrist from a fall. The bones in your spine can also be affected which can make some women become shorter. If you do break a wrist or any bone, it is very important to get your clinic to refer you to a hospital where they can check how strong your bones are.



What can I do to
keep my bones
healthy?

Your bones keep changing throughout your life so that they remain as strong as possible. If you eat the right foods with enough calcium in your diet, stay active and lead a healthy lifestyle, you can help your body to build and maintain strong bones for as long as possible. Bones stay strong if you give them work to do. To keep your bones strong, you need to do:

- **Weight-bearing** exercise with impact. Impacts are felt when you are on your feet and you add force or a jolt through your body. This could be anything from walking, skipping, running or jumping. You are weight-bearing when you are standing, with the weight of your whole body helping your bones to stay strong.
- **Muscle strengthening** exercise. When your muscles pull on your bones it gives your bones work to do. Then your bones keep their strength. As your muscles get stronger, they pull harder, meaning your bones are more likely to become stronger. To strengthen your muscles, you need to move them against some resistance. Increasing muscle resistance can be done by adding a load for the muscles to work against, such as lifting a weight in your hand above your head, or squatting down and standing up again. As your muscles get stronger and you find the movements easier, you can gradually increase the weight of the object you lift.



Women with HIV reach menopause at a similar age to women who do not have HIV. If you have HIV, the experiences and symptoms you have should not be different from women who are not HIV positive. Some women living with HIV may be more troubled by anxiety and depression and may find that these symptoms become worse during this time. Every woman's symptoms through the menopause are different and you may be fortunate and not experience many symptoms even if you have HIV, or you may have several symptoms for many years.

Some women living with HIV struggle when they have perimenopausal symptoms and they may find it hard to manage their HIV. Sometimes it is difficult to take HIV medicines, or go to clinic appointments, and this can make your health worse. If you have severe symptoms, speak to the nurse or doctor at your HIV clinic and ask them to help you get some treatment to help with your perimenopausal symptoms. Hormone therapy may help, and it will work well whether you have HIV or not. Please note that your HIV treatment still works well even when you are going through menopause. It is important to take care of your bone health especially if you have HIV, and it is important to have your bones checked because both HIV and the menopause can make your bones weaker.

Are perimenopause and menopause different for women living with HIV?



Remember, the menopause is a new phase of life for you. We hope this information is useful and will help you live a full and active life during this change and beyond.

