

EMAS summary:

Menopause guide
for women,
healthcare,
and non-healthcare
professionals



In 2023 the global female population is over 4 billion. The menopause, or the time when menstrual periods stop, is a stage of the life cycle which will occur in all women. The average age at menopause is 51 years. Women form a large part of workforces worldwide and many will be working throughout their menopausal years. While the menopause may cause no significant problems for some, for others symptoms present considerable difficulties in their working lives. Also, cardiovascular disease and osteoporosis are common diseases after the menopause. Thus, there needs to be increased public awareness about menopausal health.

The menopause and premature menopause

The menopause is a normal stage of life. The word menopause comes from the Greek words menos, meaning a month, and pausis an ending. It is caused by ageing of the ovaries and leads to a fall in estrogen levels. Although menopause normally occurs in the early 50s, it can occur much earlier, either naturally, with no identifiable underlying cause, or as a consequence of disease, surgery to remove ovaries, and radiotherapy or chemotherapy for cancer. Menopause occurring before the age of 40 is considered to be premature. It will lead to fertility issues and increase the risk of osteoporosis and cardiovascular disease.

Symptoms of the menopause

Hot flushes and night sweats are the most common symptoms of the menopause and are caused by the fall in estrogen levels. Although they may begin before periods stop, they occur most often in the year after the last period. Surgical menopause caused by the removal of ovaries often leads to flushes starting suddenly. While flushes usually affect women for less than five years some women will continue to have them after the age of 60. Flushes are caused by a malfunction in the body's normal methods of controlling its temperature. Hot flushes can occur at any time of the day or night. Night-time flushes and sweats can disturb sleep patterns, leading to insomnia, fatigue, irritability, and difficulties with short-term memory and concentration as well as muscle and joint discomfort. Low estrogen levels can also affect the pelvic organs. This can lead to a tendency to urinary tract infections, vaginal dryness, and sexual problems which can affect relationships. These symptoms may be lifelong.

Long-term effects of the menopause

The long-term effects of the menopause include cardiovascular disease, osteoporosis, and dementia in later life. This is why women need to take care of their own health.

Cardiovascular disease

Cardiovascular disease means any disease of the heart or blood vessels. The major diseases are heart attacks and strokes. Although cardiovascular disease rarely kills women under the age of 60, worldwide it is the most common cause of death in older women. Women with premature menopause are at increased risk of cardiovascular disease.

Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis is mainly a disease of older women. It affects one in three women compared with one in five men. Fractures of the wrist, hip and spine, have an enormous impact on women's lives. Hip fractures are difficult to recover from, partly because they affect the elderly. Women with a premature menopause are at increased risk of osteoporosis.

Dementia

Dementia has become a public health priority, as it has a substantial impact on not only individuals and their families but also on society. There are several different types of dementia. Alzheimer's disease is the most common form. Other types include vascular, Lewy body and frontotemporal dementia. While some treatments may lessen the symptoms of dementia and slow its progression, there are no treatments that can cure it.

Strategies for menopause

A wide range of options can be used, from lifestyle changes to medicines such as hormone replacement therapy [HRT]. Lifestyle changes include stopping smoking, losing weight, maintaining a healthy diet and exercise.

Menopause symptoms

Different options are available. Workplace and home temperature and ventilation should be reviewed and clothing and uniforms changed to thermally comfortable fabrics if possible.

HRT is an effective treatment for menopause symptoms and is usually given for around five years. There are many different types; which can be classified as either systemic [tablets by mouth, skin patches and gels] or vaginal [pessaries or tablets]. The fundamental idea of HRT is to replace the lost estrogen. However, giving estrogen alone can be harmful to the womb lining [endometrium] in women who have not had a hysterectomy. So, women who have not had a hysterectomy need a second hormone called a progestogen to counteract the effects of estrogen on the endometrium. However, women who take low-dose vaginal estrogen do not need to take a progestogen. Women who experience premature menopause are recommended to take HRT until their early 50s not only to treat symptoms but also to prevent osteoporosis. Thereafter it should be reassessed. There are no arbitrary limits regarding how long both systemic and vaginal HRT can be taken. It can be used for as long as the woman feels the benefits outweigh the risks for her, and decisions must be made on an individual basis. Some women do not want or cannot take HRT, for example after certain types of cancer. The alternative treatments include certain types of antidepressants and vaginal lubricants and moisturizers. Cognitive behavioral therapy, which can be accessed on line, may also help with symptoms.

Osteoporosis

Treatments for osteoporosis include HRT and non-estrogen medicines. HRT tends to be used in women under the age of 60. Non-estrogen medicines include bisphosphonates [tablets or injections], denosumab and parathyroid hormone [both given by injection]. They tend to be given in women over the age of 60. It must not be forgotten that calcium and vitamin D [the sunshine vitamin] play a key role in bone health. Women may be advised to take supplements if there are dietary deficiencies or if they have very little or no sunlight exposure, especially in autumn and winter.

Staying healthy during the menopause

Women's experience of menopause varies widely and is affected not only by menopausal symptoms but also by work and social pressures. The menopause can also be a wakeup call with regard to long term health issues and women should be encouraged to consult a health professional for advice, if possible.

Sources of further information

EMAS Menopause Essentials

<https://emas-online.org/guidelines-and-education/#emas-menopause-essentials>

EMAS position statements

<https://emas-online.org/guidelines-and-education/#emas-position-statements>

EMAS clinical guides

<https://emas-online.org/guidelines-and-education/#emas-clinical-guides>

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