

Menopausal hormone therapy: Starting and stopping treatment

The duration of systemic menopausal hormone therapy (MHT) with estrogen, with or without progestogen, depends on the end-point of treatment. Strategies for starting and stopping MHT are usually defined by menopausal symptoms and the presence or absence of menstruation. Topical or vaginal MHT, however, needs to be taken long term, even lifelong, for vulvovaginal atrophy.

Starting MHT

- **Amenorrhea** need not be awaited before MHT is started in **symptomatic perimenopausal women** (hot flashes, night sweats, mood changes, tiredness, arthralgia and vaginal dryness may start months or years before periods stop)
- The **dose** used should be sufficient to alleviate menopausal symptoms

Duration of MHT use

- **Hot flashes and vasomotor symptoms**, the commonest reason for taking MHT, usually last for 5 years, but some women may have symptoms for over 10 years
- For **premature menopause/ovarian insufficiency**, it is recommended that treatment is continued until the average age of the natural menopause (i.e. early 50s) and then reassessed

There are no arbitrary limits regarding how long MHT can be taken – it can be for as long as the woman feels the benefits outweigh the risks for her, and decisions must be made on an individual basis. Stopping routinely at the age of 65 is not recommended.

Stopping MHT

- It is impossible to predict whether an individual will still have symptoms when systemic MHT is stopped
- There appears to be no advantage in tapering down or in stopping systemic MHT abruptly
- **Topical (vaginal) MHT** is usually taken long term, as symptoms recur when treatment is stopped

Risks and benefits

- The Women's Health Initiative (WHI) trials with follow-up of 18 years found that MHT with conjugated equine estrogens (CEE) plus medroxyprogesterone acetate (MPA) for a median of 5.6 years or with CEE alone for a median of 7.2 years was not associated with an increased risk of all-cause, cardiovascular or cancer mortality
- **Bone loss** will resume on stopping MHT
- Some women are prepared to take systemic MHT for many years, while others may view treatment as a continuum of options because of the increased risk of breast cancer with **prolonged combined therapy**

Further information

EMAS (2025). CareOnline. Health at menopause and beyond <https://emas-online.org/guidelines-and-education/#emas-care-online>

Manson et al. (2024). The Women's Health Initiative randomized trials and clinical practice: a review <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2024.6542>