

Take a pause

The onset of menopause, though unavoidable, can be extremely unpleasant to women. Here's how to ease into the process with little discomfort

BY NIVEDITA JAYARAM PAWAR

Even though roughly half the world's population is female, it seems that most people understand surprisingly little about menopause. From mood swings and hot flashes to lowered libido and insomnia, the symptoms are there for all to see (women and their male counterparts) but very few understand why it happens and how to deal with it. So, let's start with the basics. Menopause occurs when a woman's ovaries stop making oestrogen and progesterone, the two key hormones that control the menstrual cycle. This happens gradually, over several years, with many women seeing the first signs—such as periods going haywire in their 40s. The average age at which an Indian woman has her last period is 46.2 years, much less than their western counterparts (51 years).

So menopause is when your period stops permanently. However menopause does not happen all at once. "It actually occurs in phases: perimenopause, menopause and post-menopause. Perimenopause is the process of change in hormone levels leading up to menopause. A natural process, it can last for two to eight years. During this time, oestrogen and other hormones begin to fluctuate, but periods don't stop. Menopause itself usually happens post age 40 and is the point in a woman's life when she hasn't had a period for a year. The term post-menopause refers to the time after menopause," explains Dr Rajalaxmi

Walavalkar, consultant, IVF and reproductive surgery, Cocoon Fertility.

Watch out

Menopause affects every woman differently. While some women seem to sail through the hormonal turmoil that marks the end of their fertile years with few problems; others have symptoms so dire as to make life intolerable. "It started with my periods becoming erratic. Then the night sweats. I was constantly throwing off the duvet, only to wake up freezing cold a few minutes later. I am someone who needs a good night's sleep and I wasn't getting it," says Anuradha Mitra, a 45-year-old media professional. For Ragini Mathur the extreme moods swings were unbearable. "I would become over emotional and cry reading mundane newspaper articles. Moods swings were terrible and I had to frequently apologise to my colleagues. But thankfully they understood," says the guest relations manager of a leading five star hotel.

The most common menopausal symptoms include hot flashes when you feel your body temperature rise and your skin turn red or become blotchy. Hot flashes affect the top half of your body. This rush of heat could lead to sweating, heart palpitations and feelings of dizziness. After the hot flash, you may feel cold.

"The other symptoms include dryness, loss of elasticity and thinning of the skin and increased wrinkling.

These changes result in poor wound healing, hair loss and pigmentation changes. Acne and hirsutism (which means an excess male type of hair) or alopecia may also occur. Most commonly noted is a loss of scalp hair," says Walavalkar.

The genital tract is highly oestrogen-dependent and hence body changes during the menopausal transition are most prominent here. It includes a dry vagina (which can lead to inflammation and make sex uncomfortable), and urinary problems are directly caused by the decline in oestrogen levels. Urinary frequency, cystitis and incontinence are more common around the time of menopause, adds Walavalkar. But many women report myriad other symptoms, including weight gain, loss of libido, low energy, mood swings and forgetfulness. Researchers aren't certain if these are also caused by hormone changes, or linked to more general health and lifestyle factors and the emotional upheavals that are common at this time of life—from empty nest syndrome to caring for elderly parents. There are blood tests like FSH (Follicle-stimulating hormone) and estradiol to help determine if you are moving towards perimenopause. "High levels of FSH along with low levels of estradiol in a patient whose menses have completely stopped for over one year are confirmatory that menopause has occurred," clarifies Walavalkar.



The bone factor

Hormonal changes during menopause can cause bones to weaken. "Oestrogen is required to maintain bone mineral density. Decreasing level of this hormone leads to an increase in the incidence of musculoskeletal pain and osteoarthritis," explains Walavalkar. Calcium and vitamin D are linked to good bone health, so it's important to get enough of these nutrients in your diet. "Make sure you include food rich in calcium and vitamin D in your diet. These are milk, cheese, yoghurt, spinach, tofu, egg and fish oils. This will help in improving bone health," explains Payal Kothari, integrative nutritionist and life coach. Sunlight is your main source of vitamin D, since your skin produces it when exposed to the sun. However, as you get older, your skin gets less efficient at making it. If you aren't out in the sun much or if you cover up your skin, either taking a

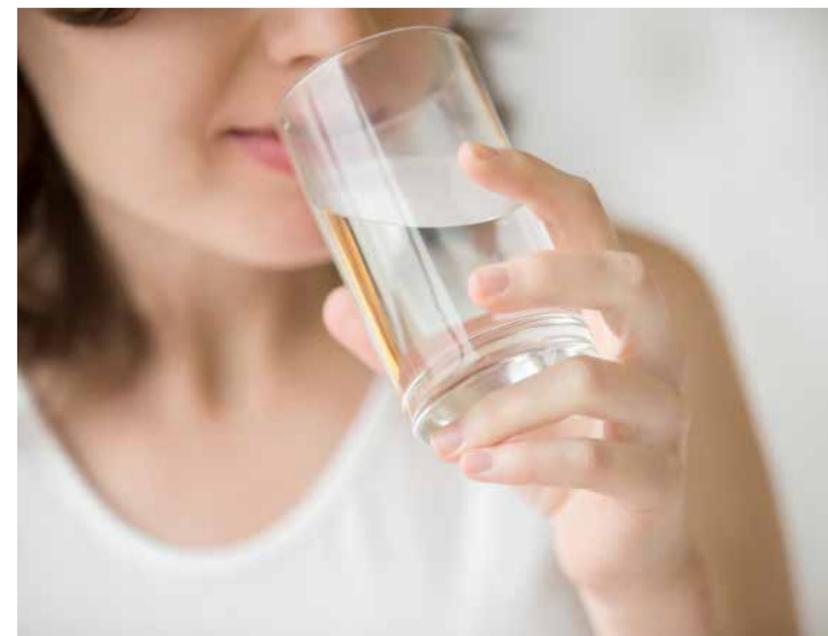
supplement or increasing food sources of vitamin D may be important.

The role of exercise

During menopause the role of physical activity becomes prominent, not only because of the range of symptoms described above, but also because menopause increases the risk for cardiovascular disease, osteoporosis, bone density loss, depression and obesity. One scientific study suggests that 60 per cent of menopausal women are overweight. Workouts also help to ease the transition by helping to relieve stress and enhancing the overall quality of life. Regular exercise is also an excellent way to stave off weight gain and loss of muscle mass, which are two frequent symptoms of menopause. "Try brisk walking, jogging, cycling or swimming. If you are a beginner, start with 10 minutes a day and gradually increase the intensity and duration. Start with some basic stretch-

ing exercise to improve flexibility and warm up your muscles; then move on to simple weight bearing exercises like squats, lunges, pushups and dumbbells to keep your muscles strong," explains fitness expert Shivani Patel. As the risk of osteoporosis skyrockets following menopause, strength training is especially vital. Strength training exercises will help to build bone and muscle strength, burn body fat, and rev up your metabolism.

Additionally yoga, meditation and deep breathing exercises can also help. "Menopause can cause disturbance in the tridosha, or the bioenergies, particularly the vata dosha (space and air). A few symptoms of these dosha imbalances include hot flashes, fatigue, weight gain, disturbed sleep and even mood swings. Ayurveda, through a combination of therapies, diet and yoga can help in countering the menopausal symptoms. Abhyanga,



an ancient Ayurvedic therapy which involves massaging the whole body with warm herbal oil, is specifically helpful for vata pacification and restoring the flow of vital energy (prana) in the body, while eliminating toxins. The practice of yoga *nidra* before bedtime will help release excess tension in the body and impart a sense of relaxation, spreading throughout your entire body and mind," says Dr Hrishikesh Ashok, chief ayurveda consultant, Naad Wellness. Other relaxation techniques such as deep breathing with abdominal movements will reduce both physical and psychological reactions to stress. A regular yoga practice reduces high blood pressure and promotes oxygenation and blood circulation in the body. This in turn, can help ease those terrible night sweats.

Coping strategies

Experts believe that women can look forward to an easy perimenopause with good preparation. Although many women may not experience perimenopause until their mid-40s or later, building that healthy foundation from your 30s onwards can be hugely helpful. It's like competing in a triathlon: chances are you wouldn't turn up on the day with no training and expect

to sail through it; the same goes for the perimenopause. "Include whole fruits, vegetables and phytoestrogen-rich food such as flax seeds and soy. In fact, flaxseeds if taken regularly can also help with hot flashes," suggests Ashok.

According to Kothari, avoiding junk, processed food, excess salt, aerated drinks and sugary desserts is the key. "These leach out the essential nutrients your body is trying to absorb. Make friends with avocado, a complete fruit that amply contains the most essential nutrients and healthy good mono-unsaturated fats we need to balance our hormones and keep our skin and hair glowing. Also micro-nutrients are absorbed well when there is good fat around. Include jowar, buckwheat, quinoa, brown rice, legumes, coconut flesh, nuts, seeds, etc. in your diet. These are high in fibre and rich in good fats which control blood sugar levels that cause weight gain."

Family Matters

Menopause generally occurs at an active time in the life of a woman when she is busy working, sending children to college and caring for ageing parents. This busy schedule leaves little time for dealing with the dramatic changes brought on by

Tips to deal with menopause

- ◆ Cut back on the wine. Alcohol can wreak havoc on hormone balance, upset blood sugar and can trigger hot flashes and night sweats. It also affects the liver, which has to be in top form to efficiently detoxify excess hormones.
- ◆ Drink lots of water to stay hydrated during the day, but just sip at night. This will avoid multiple washroom visits in the night.
- ◆ Wear lightweight, natural fibre, moisture-absorbing clothing to sleep.
- ◆ Control your portions. By the time you hit menopause, your metabolism may be more than 20 per cent slower than it was when you were younger, which means that any food you consume will take longer to convert into energy.
- ◆ Get a good night's sleep. Keeping your bedroom cool and switching off all electronic gadgets for at least an hour before you want to fall asleep will help.
- ◆ Smoking can make menopause symptoms worse.
- ◆ Don't stop exercising. You can get a lot of benefit from just 30 minutes of exercise a day, including cardio (running, walking, dancing, skipping) and strength training (using weights or resistance).
- ◆ Don't say goodbye to your gynaecologist. If you still have a uterus, you'll still need a Pap test every three years (more often if you have certain risk factors) and a pelvic exam every year.

menopause. Hence husbands play a central role. "Menopausal changes like vaginal dryness can disrupt the intimacy of the couple. Husbands need to be counselled that this is a physiological process. Also, children and other family members should know that mood swings can be best treated by being considerate and empathising with the woman," says Walavalkar. □