

Menopause

Definition

Menopause is the transition period in a woman's life when the ovaries stop producing eggs, menstrual activity decreases and eventually ceases, and the body decreases the production of the female hormones, estrogen, and progesterone.

Causes, incidence, and risk factors

Menopause (also called the "change of life" or climacteric) is a natural event in a woman's life, which normally occurs between the ages of 40 and 55. On average, menopause begins at about age 51.

During menopause, ovulation (egg production) ceases, eliminating the possibility of pregnancy, and menstruation becomes less frequent and eventually stops.

The symptoms of menopause are caused by changes in estrogen and progesterone levels. As the ovaries become less functional, they produce less estrogen/progesterone and the body subsequently reacts. Some women experience few if any symptoms, while others experience various symptoms ranging from mild to fairly severe.

This variation is normal. A gradual decrease of estrogen allows the body to slowly adjust to the hormone change, but in some women a sudden decrease in estrogen level occurs, causing severe symptoms. This result is often seen when menopause is caused by surgical removal of the ovaries (surgical menopause).

Estrogen is responsible for the buildup of the epithelial lining of the uterine cavity. During the reproductive years this buildup occurs and is then shed (menstruation) on a monthly basis (usually)..

The mood changes and lack of sex drive that are sometimes associated with menopause may result partially from the hormone decrease, but may also result from having to adjust to hot flashes and vaginal dryness.

In addition to these side effects, there are others that may develop over many months or years. Decreased estrogen levels increase the risk for osteoporosis (loss of calcium from the bones, causing bone fragility), which sometimes isn't detected until a bone fracture occurs.

The decreasing estrogen levels seen with menopause also cause changes in cholesterol levels that may increase a woman's risk for heart disease.

Symptoms

Symptoms, when present, may include:

- Hot flashes and skin flushing
- Mood changes
- Amenorrhea (no menstrual periods) or irregular menstrual periods
- Vaginal dryness and dyspareunia (painful sexual intercourse)
- Decreased libido (sex drive)

Signs and tests

Blood and urine tests can be used to measure hormone levels that may indicate that a woman is close to menopause or is postmenopausal. Examples of these tests include:

- Estradiol - test
- FSH
- LH

A Pap smear may indicate changes in the vaginal lining (mucosa) caused by changes in estrogen levels. A bone density test may be performed to screen for low bone density levels seen with osteoporosis.

Treatment

Menopause is a natural process. It does not necessarily require treatment unless menopausal symptoms, such as hot flashes or vaginal dryness, are bothersome. Some women may also choose treatment to prevent long-term health problems like osteoporosis, especially if they begin menopause at an early age (for instance after surgery).

The most common treatment used by women in these cases is estrogen replacement therapy (ERT) or hormone replacement therapy (HRT), but other treatments are available if ERT is not appropriate for you. Not all postmenopausal women need to be treated with ERT or HRT. Each woman should discuss her individual risks and benefits with her health care provider.