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What is menopause?

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Over the past few centuries, medical advances have gradually increased life expectancy in America. As such, there are now more women living beyond menopause than ever before and the total number of postmenopausal women in the United States is increasing. In 2000, there was an estimated 30 million women older than age 55, compared with 28 million in 1990. By 2020, the size of this group is estimated to be over 45 million.

But just exactly what is menopause? Menopause is the time in a woman's life when her periods stop and she can no longer have children. This happens because as a woman ages, her ovaries stop making the female hormones estrogen and progesterone. You may have heard menopause being called "the change of life." This typically occurs between the age of 45 and 60 with the U.S. average occurring around age 51. Menopause is a gradual process that can take several years and a woman is not really through menopause until she hasn't had a period for 6 to 12 months. This is called the perimenopausal period and during this time, the cycle of her periods will become irregular and she needs to keep using birth control in order to prevent unwanted pregnancies.

I usually tell my perimenopausal patient that she may have both physical and psychological symptoms during this stage. Symptoms may occur for a few weeks, a few months, or sometimes over several years. The symptoms may be intermittent, or they may occur regularly. These symptoms include:

- Irregular menstrual periods
- Hot flashes
- Dizziness
- Headaches
- Muscle and joint pain
- Dry skin

Some women may even have vaginal dryness and shrinkage of genital tissues, sometimes resulting in discomfort or pain during sexual intercourse. In other women, the leakage of urine (urinary incontinence) or increase occurrence of minor vaginal and urinary infections may also occur.

Amazingly, menopause usually occurs at a time in a woman's life when other dramatic social changes take place. Some of these changes may include loss of parents, children growing up and leaving home, becoming a grandparent, retirement, or career changes. These changes, in addition to the changes in a woman's body, may result in psychological or emotional stress. Thus, psychological symptoms of menopause may include: anxiety, depression, irritability, sleeplessness, or even a loss of concentration.

Fortunately, the news isn't all bad and some things you might have heard about menopause aren't true. For example, women don't lose interest in sex because of menopause. Many women feel better since they no longer have to worry about having periods. Many women also enjoy sex more without having to worry about the risk of pregnancy.

Certain health problems, such as osteoporosis and increased heart disease, are associated with low estrogen. To help prevent such problems, many women choose to take estrogen, a natural hor-

mone, to replace what their body is no longer producing. This treatment is called hormone replacement therapy (HRT). HRT can relieve symptoms such as hot flashes, vaginal dryness and some urinary problems. HRT also has some other more important benefits such as reducing the risk of osteoporosis and heart disease. Like any medication, though, it can have side effects in some women. You may have heard recently that some researchers believe that women who take HRT may be at a very slightly increased risk of breast cancer. But since the benefit of reducing heart disease may be greater than the risk of developing breast cancer, many women still favor taking HRT. Because every woman is different, she should talk to her doctor about weighing these benefits and drawbacks before starting estrogen. I tell my patients that the treatment of menopause symptoms, whether or not she is taking hormones, should start with regular exercise and a healthy calcium-rich diet (such as soybean products and whole grains).

Keep in mind that menopause is a natural part of a woman's life. It is not a disease and many women can still maintain an active lifestyle. I encourage all my perimenopausal patients to talk and share her feelings with a friend or family member who understands what she is experiencing. Sometimes joining a support group for women who have been or are going through menopause can be very helpful.

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