

INTRODUCTION TO MENOPAUSE AND HORMONE THERAPY

Natural menopause is defined as the permanent cessation of menstrual periods, determined retrospectively after a woman has experienced 12 months without any. **The average age for the last period is 51.4 years.** The **menopausal transition** (premenopause) **begins on average 4 years earlier**, but it is highly variable. “Every woman has her own journey through menopause” is a commonly used and accurate expression.

Virtually all women experience menstrual irregularities and hormonal fluctuations prior to menopause; up to 80 percent develop hot flashes (the most common menopausal symptom), but **only 20 to 30 percent need medical treatment.** Hot flashes typically begin as a sudden sensation of heat centered on the upper chest and face that rapidly becomes generalized. The sensation of heat lasts from **two to four minutes**, is often associated with profuse sweating and occasionally palpitations, and is sometimes followed by chills and shivering, and a feeling of anxiety. Hot flashes stop spontaneously within four to five years of onset in the majority of women, but they persist in 12-15% over 60 years and 9% over 70 years.

Blood hormone tests (or saliva tests) are not required for the diagnosis of menopause. They are unreliable in the sense that they only reflect what is going on at that particular time, and the hormones fluctuate widely throughout the day, from day to day, and from month to month. **Exceptions** may include women who had a hysterectomy or an ablation, early (before 45) or premature (before 40) menopause, women who are taking the birth control pills or have irregular periods due to polycystic ovaries or other endocrine disorders. Blood tests may be required for other reasons (for example: to rule out thyroid and liver diseases)

To **educate** yourself, I suggest you go to the **online information** provided by the **CANADIAN SIGMA MENOPAUSE SOCIETY**, (<https://www.sigmamenopause.com>, consumer→publications). Their most complete publication is called: ***Menopause Treatment Options, Making the Right Choice for YOU.***

In women needing help to control their menopausal symptoms, there are many alternatives. The interventions that may be helpful in improving menopausal symptoms include:

- 1. Lifestyle based changes:** such as cooling and avoiding triggers, exercise and yoga, weight loss, acupuncture, mindfulness and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.
- 2. Over the counter and natural health products:** soy products, black cohosh, chasteberry, red clover, rhubarb, wild yam, primrose evening oil, flaxseed, fermented soy bean extract and any combination of the above.
- 3. Non-hormonal prescriptions:** antidepressants (Effexor, Celexa), gabapentin and clonidine.
- 4. Hormone therapy,** however, is still the best by far, and it is safe if **chosen wisely.**

There are always 2 sides of the coin (the good and the bad). There is a safety check list (produced by the Endocrine Society) that we use routinely now to verify that taking estrogen and progesterone is a safe choice for an individual woman.

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