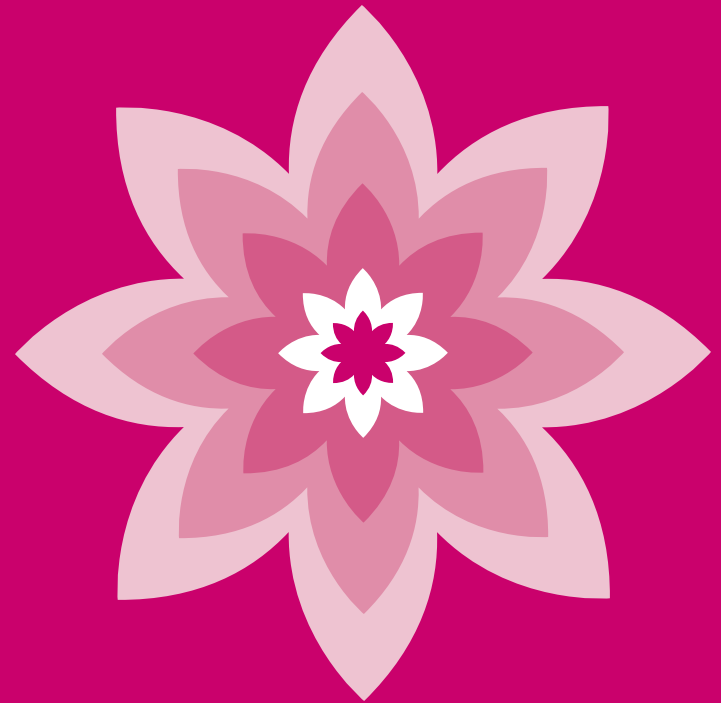


# *Menopause*

A NATURAL CHANGE





## CONCLUSION

The average Canadian woman can expect to live to 80 years of age or older. This means you may live more than one-third of your life after menopause. Knowing what to expect and how to care for yourself is very important.

Eat healthy, exercise regularly and take time to relax. Have regular medical checkups. Seek information from a variety of sources. If you are experiencing specific problems, or have questions or concerns adjusting to menopause, seek help from your health care provider.

## WEB LINKS

Health Canada  
[www.healthcanada.gc.ca](http://www.healthcanada.gc.ca)

Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology  
[www.csep.ca](http://www.csep.ca)

Menopause and You  
[www.menopauseandu.ca](http://www.menopauseandu.ca)

What is Sexuality and U  
[www.sexualityandu.ca](http://www.sexualityandu.ca)

## MENOPAUSE - WHAT TO EXPECT

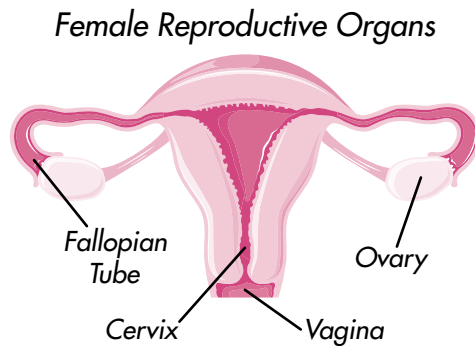
Menopause is a natural stage in your life. It usually starts between ages 45 and 55, although it can happen earlier. "Menopause" literally means the end of your monthly cycles. You no longer have menstrual periods. It marks the beginning of a new phase in your life. You can enjoy sexual activity without the worry of pregnancy. You may also have more time for yourself and your partner especially if your children are now grown up.

Menopause or the "change of life" is different for every woman. Menopause has many positive aspects. However, some women do experience physical and emotional changes. This booklet will provide you with information about menopause and offer suggestions for dealing with the changes it brings.



## MENOPAUSE

Menopause is the time of life when you stop having menstrual periods. It is a gradual process occurring over several years. It occurs due to a decrease in the amount of hormones (estrogen and progesterone) produced by your ovaries. The ovaries are shown in the diagram.



In your early to mid-forties you may notice changes in your menstrual cycle. You may skip one or two periods, and bleeding may be heavier or lighter than normal. These changes occur over several years; we call this phase **perimenopause**. Usually during this time, menstruation becomes less and less frequent until it stops altogether. For some women however, periods may stop suddenly.

You have reached menopause when you have not had a period for a full twelve months. All the years after your last period are referred to as the **post-menopause** phase.

Although your periods may be irregular, you can still become pregnant. To avoid pregnancy at this time, use birth control until at least twelve months have passed since your last period. There are a variety of birth control methods available. Contact your health care provider to obtain information on current birth control methods.

Menopause can occur earlier as a result of disease or surgical removal of the ovaries or certain types of drug treatments. In these cases, the changes of menopause can occur suddenly and may be more severe than if menopause occurs naturally.



## TREATMENT OPTIONS

In addition to practicing a healthy active lifestyle, there are treatment options which can help you deal with the changes of menopause.

### *Hormonal Medications*

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) may be prescribed if the changes brought on by menopause are particularly troublesome. Estrogen alone or in combination with progesterone can restore balance and improve well-being for some women. If coping with menopausal changes is difficult, it is important to discuss your risks and benefits for HRT with your health care provider.

### *Non-Hormonal Medications*

There are other medications which may be useful in reducing the effects of the changes associated with menopause. Discuss any concerns with your health care provider.

### *Alternative Therapies*

Some women seek alternative therapies to manage the changes of menopause. These include:

- herbal products
- acupuncture
- relaxation therapy
- massage therapy
- yoga
- meditation

Before you decide to take medications, or use alternative therapies, weigh the benefits and risks. Some herbal products can interfere with prescribed medications. Check with your health care provider **before** starting any new therapy.



## HEALTHY LIFESTYLES

You can't change your age or your family history, but you can make lifestyle changes to help reduce your risks. To decrease your risk for disease, see your health care provider to assess your medical and family history.

To promote health during menopause and prevent increased risk for disease after menopause, follow these lifestyle suggestions:

### *Regular Screening*

Have check-ups such as a pap test, clinical breast examination, mammogram, blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar, as directed by your health care provider.

### *Eat Healthy*

Healthy eating helps you feel your best. It also relieves some of the discomforts of menopause and helps protect your long-term health. Follow Canada's Food Guide.

### *Maintain a Healthy Weight*

Some women may gain weight as they age. If you have unwanted weight gain discuss with your health care provider.

### *Regular Exercise*

Make exercise a regular part of your life. An active lifestyle will help lower body fat and maintain a healthy weight, build muscle and bone strength, lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels, improve coordination and balance, increase your energy, and brighten your mood.

### *Additional Healthy Choices:*

- stop smoking/avoid second-hand smoke
- limit alcohol intake
- use sunscreens and avoid direct exposure to the sun
- think positively about menopause as a new phase in your life



## THE CHANGES OF MENOPAUSE

The end of menstrual periods may be the only change women will experience when they go through menopause. Some women may experience physical and emotional changes during this time. Some changes include:

- hot flashes/night sweats
- vaginal dryness
- bowel/bladder changes
- change in sexual desires
- mood swings/depression

Some women may have changes severe enough to require medical attention. If you have concerns, talk to your health care provider.

## HOT FLASHES

Hot flashes are common during menopause. Changes in hormone levels cause blood to rush to the surface of the skin, creating a flushed feeling. A deep blush may appear on the upper chest, neck and face.

Hot flashes can happen and last anywhere from a few seconds to several minutes. Most times they are mild and infrequent. They can occur as rarely as once a month or as often as several times an hour. They may cause you to sweat or have a rapid heart beat. Hot flashes are sometimes followed by a chilled feeling.

Hot flashes which occur at night are called **night sweats**. They can interfere with sleep, and account for the feelings of tiredness or irritability that some women have during menopause. Though unpleasant, hot flashes are not life threatening.



## SUGGESTIONS TO RELIEVE HOT FLASHES

Keep a record to see if there are certain foods or drinks which trigger a hot flash. Some suggestions that may help you manage a hot flash:

- take a cold drink at the first sign of a hot flash
- wear clothing in layers which can be easily removed
- carry a small hand fan
- do not smoke
- avoid spicy foods, caffeine and alcohol
- exercise regularly
- breathe deeply and imagine you are in a cool place if hot flashes occur when in public
- take a cool shower at bedtime if you have night sweats
- wear cotton clothing and use cotton bed sheets
- keep water by your bedside

See your health care provider if your hot flashes bother you or interfere with your daily activities.



## HEALTH RISKS

As well as the changes related to menopause, the aging process also brings an increased risk for certain diseases. They include heart disease, osteoporosis, cancer and diabetes.

*Heart Disease:* A woman's risk for heart disease begins to rise with increasing age. Other risk factors for heart disease include smoking, high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, a family history of heart disease, excess weight, lack of physical activity and diabetes.

*Osteoporosis:* The risk of osteoporosis increases as women get older. Osteoporosis is a condition in which strong bones become fragile and easily broken. The decrease in hormone levels at the time of menopause puts women at a higher risk for developing osteoporosis. Some other factors which may contribute to osteoporosis include: thinness, family history, poor eating habits, smoking, excessive use of alcohol, and a lack of weight bearing exercises such as walking, dancing, skiing, etc.

*Cancer:* The risk for cancer increases as you get older. A family history of cancer adds to this risk. Lifestyle factors which increase the risk for cancers include: overexposure to sunlight, a diet high in fat or low in fiber, excess weight, smoking, excessive use of alcohol and an inactive lifestyle.

*Diabetes:* Diabetes is the inability of the body to use sugar properly. The risk of adult-onset diabetes increases as you get older. Other factors, which increase the risk for diabetes, include inactivity, excess weight and a family history of diabetes. Sometimes diabetes can be controlled by diet, weight loss and exercise alone. However medication is often needed. If not controlled, diabetes can result in complications such as heart, kidney and eyes disease as well as other conditions.



## SEXUALITY

Women who enjoyed a healthy sex life before menopause will likely continue to do so after menopause. Without the fear of pregnancy, many women find sex more enjoyable. Whether satisfied through intercourse or simply by holding hands, maintaining intimacy between a woman and her partner is very important. Discuss any concerns you may have with your partner and/or health care provider.

## MOOD SWINGS OR DEPRESSION

Most women go through menopause without much emotional upset. However, some women may find they are moody, irritable or depressed for no reason. Although some women are moody because hot flashes interrupt their sleep, these feelings may also be due to changes in their family, job or other relationships. You may be upset about your children leaving home or worried about the care of an elderly parent. You may be unhappy with your career or have problems with a friend or spouse.

*The following suggestions may help you stay emotionally healthy:*

- think positively about your new stage in life
- get involved in a hobby, volunteer work, or new aspects of your career
- share your feelings with your family and friends
- take time out for yourself
- make sure you get enough rest
- exercise regularly to help relax and reduce stress

See your health care provider if you experience intense or long-lasting feelings of depression.



## VAGINAL DRYNESS

Changes in hormone levels during menopause may cause a decrease production of natural fluid from the vagina which can result in dryness. This may cause an itching or burning feeling and may also cause intercourse to be painful. The vaginal walls also become thinner and less elastic. Some women may be more prone to vaginal infections during this time.

Suggestions to help prevent vaginal dryness:

- regular intercourse/stimulation will help keep the vagina moist
- use a water based gel, such as K-Y or Replens, if intercourse is uncomfortable
- avoid bubble baths, vaginal sprays and douches as they can result in vaginal dryness and infection
- ask your health care provider about hormonal creams, gels, or tablets





## BOWEL OR BLADDER PROBLEMS

Some women may experience bowel or bladder problems as a result of weakened pelvic floor muscles. This weakness may be due to surgery, lack of exercise, or childbirth. Problems may include:

- incontinence – a leaking of urine, especially when coughing, sneezing or laughing
- diarrhea
- constipation
- a prolapsed (falling) of the uterus, bladder or rectum

### *Kegel Exercises*

Kegel exercises can help to relieve incontinence by strengthening the pelvic floor muscles. Kegel exercises are entirely private. You can do them anywhere at any time. They can be performed in any position: sitting, lying or standing. For best results, do these exercises several times a day.

You can locate the muscles used in Kegel exercises by stopping the flow of urine when emptying your bladder. Only do this to locate the muscles – not as an exercise. Before you start your exercise, breathe out slowly flattening the abdominal wall, and then begin your Kegel exercises.

### *Wave Exercise*

Tighten the muscles around the anus, vagina and urethra (opening through which urine passes) from back to front. When all three muscles are tightened, hold for three seconds, and then relax them in a wave-like motion from front to back. Repeat five times.

### *Elevator Exercise*

Imagine you are on an elevator going from the first to the tenth floor. Breathe in and tighten your pelvic floor muscles a little at a time, rising slowly and stopping at each floor until you reach the tenth floor at the count of ten. Then gradually go down, slowly releasing your muscles at each floor until you reach first floor and your muscles are totally relaxed. Repeat several times a day.

### *Vacuum Exercise*

Raise the entire pelvic area, as though sucking water into the vagina. Relax and repeat five times.

### *Suggestions to Help Bowel and Bladder Problems*

To maintain regular bowel and bladder habits:

- eat healthy including foods high in fiber which include whole grains breads and cereal, vegetables, fruit, dried peas, beans and lentils
- exercise daily to keep your bowels regular
- drink 6 - 8 glasses of fluid every day. Fluid may include water, milk, juice and soups
- cranberry juice may help prevent bladder infections
- practice good personal hygiene to prevent infection. Bathe frequently and wipe from front to back after urinating

