

NIH News in Health

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Preparing for Menopause A Woman's Midlife Change

During midlife, a woman's menstrual periods grow further and further apart. At some point, they stop completely, and she can no longer get pregnant.

This is because the ovaries aren't releasing eggs and making **hormones** like estrogen anymore. After 12 months without a period, a woman can say she's gone through menopause.

In the years before menopause, women may experience skipped and unpredictable menstrual periods. This phase is called the midlife transition, perimenopause, or the change of life. Some women go through the transition faster than others. It lasts between 1 and 10 years.

Midlife Transition • Typically, menopause occurs between ages 45 and 55. This means women can expect less frequent periods and other symptoms at some point during their 40s. But it's different for every woman. There's no lab test to predict when in life it will start or how easy it will be.

Along with unpredictable periods, a woman may have other symp-



toms—both physical and emotional. Hot flashes, poor sleep, and mood changes are common. Some women have vaginal dryness, weight gain, and thinning hair. Bone density may also start to decrease.

“Most people don't have severe symptoms. Most people have mild or less frequent symptoms,” says Dr. Hadine Joffe, an NIH-supported menopause researcher and psychiatrist at Brigham and Women's Hospital.

NIH is funding studies looking into how to relieve menopause symptoms. There are medicines and lifestyle changes that can help.

“No two people are going to go through menopause in exactly the same way,” explains Dr. Chhanda Dutta, who oversees clinical aging research at NIH. “Different women

go through menopause with different kinds of symptoms, and we're trying to give them options for how they can manage them.”

Waves of Heat • Hot flashes are a common symptom during the midlife transition. Many women have these for several years after menopause. Some experience hot flashes for 10 or more years.

A mild hot flash feels like being embarrassed, Joffe says. “There's a wave of heat sensation that rises to your head and chest, and sometimes you look red, feel hot, and then it's gone.”

A not-so-mild hot flash can make your skin appear very red. Your head, neck, and chest may become hot and sweaty.

“It's particularly disruptive at night,” Joffe says. “People are waking up, feeling very hot and sweaty, and they have weird, disrupted sleep.”

NIH-supported studies have found some medicines that reduce hot flashes. The most effective FDA-approved treatment is low-dose

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Definitions

Hormones

Substances sent through the bloodstream to signal another part of the body to grow or react a certain way.

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hormone therapy. Some women are given estrogen or estrogen with another hormone, progesterin. Women take hormone therapy for the shortest time that they need it.

Not every woman can take hormone therapy. Another option is an antidepressant that is FDA-approved for treating moderate to severe hot flashes.

A doctor can help determine which medicine might work best. See the Wise Choices box for other ways to outsmart hot flashes.

Restless Nights • During midlife, women may start having trouble sleeping because of changes in hormone levels. Hot flashes and night sweats can also cause women to wake up.

“In people who have hot flashes at night, their sleep is disrupted throughout the entire night. It’s like a ripple of a sleep irritation throughout the whole night,” Joffe says. A woman may feel tired the next day as a result.

The medicines that help with hot flashes may also help ease sleep issues. But other things can help, too.

If a hot flash or anything else

wakes you up, avoid looking at a clock. “It’s much easier to fall back to sleep if you don’t know what time it is,” Joffe advises.

She also says to avoid tossing and turning. If you wake up, get out of bed briefly to read and then get back into bed to go back to sleep.

Exercise can also help women sleep better at night. It’s best to avoid caffeine and alcohol for several hours before bedtime, too. Both can disrupt sleep.

For women who have a hard time falling asleep, relaxation breathing can help. Slowly breathe in through your nose. With a hand below your ribs, feel your stomach push your hand out. Slowly exhale through your mouth. You can do this for several minutes to relax.

Rollercoaster Moods • During perimenopause, many women become irritable or feel moody. Some may feel sad and anxious and unable to enjoy things as much as they used to.

If a woman has these symptoms day after day for at least 2 weeks, she may be dealing with a clinical depression. “There is a two- to three-fold risk of depression during perimenopause,” says NIH psychiatrist and researcher Dr. Peter J. Schmidt.

Although most women don’t have a problem with depression during this transition, he explains, changes in hormones can bring a negative mood for some women. Researchers are studying how to counteract the effects of shifting hormone levels.

Schmidt and his colleagues found that women who were at risk of depression and taking estrogen therapy were less likely to become depressed during perimenopause. The medicine prevented dips in estrogen and seemed to prevent mood plunges as well.

“If you think you’re at a higher risk



Wise Choices

How to Live With Hot Flashes

- Wear light clothing.
- Keep your room cool.
- Use a fan.
- Drink cold water.
- Avoid smoking, caffeine, spicy foods, and alcohol.
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Take several slow and deep breaths when you feel a hot flash coming on.
- Ask your doctor about medicines that can help.

of depression, you should proactively touch base with your doctor, says Schmidt. “Talk about what kind of symptoms you should be looking for and be concerned about as you age.”

He advises that you set up a plan for how to look for symptoms of depression. That way, you can enter midlife prepared to act. Schmidt encourages anyone who has a depressed mood to seek help from a primary care doctor or mental health professional.

Midlife Well-Being • The midlife transition is a phase of life that brings gradual changes. Many women don’t have problems during this transition.

You can make midlife your time for optimizing well-being by eating well, exercising, and getting quality sleep. The healthier you are at midlife, the more successful you’ll be combating age-related changes and diseases.

“We see it almost like a window of opportunity where people want to be entering midlife as healthy as possible,” Joffe says. “It’s really important for people to do the right thing now. And protect their health over time.” ■

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Editor Harrison Wein, Ph.D.

Managing Editor Tianna Hicklin, Ph.D.

Graphics Alan Defibaugh (illustrations),
Bryan Ewsichek (design)

Contributors Geri Piazza, Sharon Reynolds, and
Claire Rutkowski

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National Institutes of Health
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Office of Communications & Public Liaison
Building 31, Room 5B52
Bethesda, MD 20892-2094
email: nihnewsinhealth@od.nih.gov
phone: 301-451-8224



Web Links

For more about menopause, see “Links” in the online article: newsinhealth.nih.gov/2018/07/preparing-menopause

Acne Breakouts

Controlling Problem Pimples

Zits. Pimples. Spots.

Whatever you call it, acne can cause discomfort and embarrassment. This skin condition affects most people at some point during their lives. About 4 out of every 5 people experience acne outbreaks between the ages of 11 and 30.

Acne starts in the skin's oil glands. The hair on our bodies comes out through canals from these glands called follicles. Oil glands make oils that emerge to the skin's surface through the follicles' openings, or pores, along with the hairs.

Sometimes hair, oil, and dead skin cells come together to plug a follicle. The plugged pore provides the right conditions for bacteria that normally live on the skin to thrive. When the body's **immune system** attacks the bacteria, pain and swelling can result. That's how a pimple forms.

Doctors don't know why only some people get acne. They do know what raises the risk for acne. Increases in certain **hormones** can cause oil glands to get bigger and make more oil. These hormone levels go up during puberty. Because of this, acne is most common in adolescents and young adults. Hormone changes caused by pregnancy or by starting

Definitions

Immune System

The system that protects your body from invading viruses, bacteria, and other microscopic threats.

Hormones

Substances sent through the bloodstream to signal another part of the body to grow or react a certain way.



or stopping birth control pills can also trigger acne.

But people of all ages can get acne. For most, acne goes away by the time they reach their 30s. However, some people in their 30s, 40s, and 50s still get acne. Although acne is usually not a serious health threat, it can be upsetting, and severe acne can lead to permanent scarring.

There are things you can do to prevent acne, explains Dr. Edward Cowen, a skin specialist at NIH. He recommends that people with acne avoid skin products that contain petrolatum, a type of oil. Instead, he says, look for creams and lotions labeled "noncomedogenic." These are less likely to clog pores. A lot of people think certain foods can cause acne breakouts. However, Cowen explains, research has not been able to confirm this in most

cases. See the Wise Choices box for other tips.

While there are plenty of home remedies for acne, Cowen says, it's better to start with proven over-the-counter treatments for mild acne. These products can contain benzoyl peroxide, resorcinol, salicylic acid, or sulfur.

People with severe acne should discuss prescription drug options with a doctor, he adds. These include antibiotics to kill bacteria or drugs called retinoids, which can be given as a topical to apply to the skin or as an oral medication.

NIH-funded scientists are conducting research to better understand why acne develops and to find better ways to treat the condition. ■



Wise Choices

Fight Acne Flare-Ups

These good habits can help reduce acne:

- **Be gentle.** Avoid scrubbing hard when washing your face.
- **Hands off.** Resist the temptation to squeeze or pick at pimples.
- **Avoid oily skin products.** Choose lotions and make-up labeled "noncomedogenic." These are less likely to clog your pores.
- **Wash your hair.** If you have oily hair, washing it every day can reduce oil on the skin.
- **Loosen up.** Avoid pressure from tight-fitting clothing, sports equipment, or backpack straps, which can irritate the skin.



Web Links

For more about acne, see "Links" in the online article: newsinhealth.nih.gov/2018/07/acne-breakouts



Health Capsules

For links to more information, please visit our website and see these stories online.

Eating Well May Slow Hearing Loss in Women

Many people lose some of their hearing as they get older. Experts say that, of those over the age of 75, about half have hearing loss. Not being able to hear well can make it hard to communicate. That can affect relationships with loved ones, friends, and coworkers.

A new study shows that women who have a pattern of healthy eating have a lower risk of hearing loss than women who don't eat well. A healthy eating pattern includes lots of vegetables, fruits, and whole grains. It limits sugar, salt, and animal fat.

The study took place between 1991 and 2013. Women taking part in the

study were all professional nurses. Every 4 years, the researchers asked the women to recall what they had eaten over the past year. About 71,000 women responded to the questionnaires.

The research team also asked the women whether they had noticed a hearing problem. During the study, more than 2,000 women said they had developed moderate or worse hearing loss.

The team used the reports of food intake to group the women by diet patterns. They compared women with the healthiest pattern to those with the least healthy pattern. The

women with the healthiest diet pattern were less likely to have a hearing problem.

“Interestingly, we observed that those following an overall healthy diet had a lower risk of moderate or worse hearing loss,” says researcher Dr. Sharon G. Curhan at Brigham and Women's Hospital. “Eating well contributes to overall good health, and it may also be helpful in reducing the risk of hearing loss.”

Because the study included only women, more research is needed to see whether the results also apply to men. ■

Discover Herbal Products

Are you thinking of trying an herb to improve your health? Find out about the uses, effectiveness, and possible side effects of herbal products before you try them. NIH's new app, “HerbList,” has the herb info you need in an on-the-go package.

Use the app to explore what the science says about over 50 common herbs and herbal products. It fea-

tures an alphabetical list of herbs with a picture of the plant next to each name. Click on an herb to learn specific facts about it. You'll find background knowledge, safety problems like drug interactions that may arise, side effects, and links to more information.

You can also save your favorite herbs for easy recall or offline

access. There are many popular herbs and herbal supplements to explore, like aloe, chamomile, ginger, and turmeric.

HerbList is available to download to your phone or tablet from the Apple App Store or Google Play. Visit nccih.nih.gov/health/herblistapp for the links. ■



Featured Website

Smokefree 60+

60plus.smokefree.gov

Are you 60 or older? Do you need help quitting smoking? It's never too late to quit.

Visit the Smokefree 60+ website for strategies and tools proven to help smokers quit.

Download a mobile app to track your progress. Sign up for the free text-messaging service. Or learn about the free counseling service. There are many options to fit your needs.



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