

Glenn's Strategies for Well-Being: MENOPAUSE

Written by Forward Times Staff
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Many things can happen in a woman's body because of the changes in hormone patterns that begin during the menopausal transition. Some women are bothered by only a few symptoms during perimenopause. Others are very uncomfortable, while the rest hardly feel any different. Scientists are still trying to understand how the hormone changes during the menopausal transition may affect a woman's periods and menopausal symptoms.

Menopause is only one of several stages in the reproductive life of a woman. The entire menopause transition is divided into distinct stages known as premature menopause, premenopause, perimenopause, menopause, and postmenopause.

Menopause is brought on by low levels of estrogen and progesterone and can cause symptoms such as irregular periods, hot flashes, vaginal dryness, memory loss and difficulty concentrating, insomnia and fatigue, frequent urination, and mood swings.

Premature menopause is menopause that occurs before the age of 40, whether it is natural or induced by medical or surgical means. Women who enter menopause early have symptoms similar to those of natural menopause, like hot flashes, emotional problems, vaginal dryness, and decreased sex drive. However, for some women with premature menopause, these symptoms are severe. Also, women who have premature menopause tend to get weaker bones faster than women who enter menopause later in life.

Perimenopause marks the time when your body begins its move into menopause. It includes the years leading up to menopause— anywhere from 2 to 8 years—plus the first year after your

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final period. There is no way to predict how long perimenopause will last or how long it will take you to go through it. It's a natural part of a woman's life that signals the ending of her reproductive years.

Menopause is a normal change in a woman's life when her period stops. It is often called the "change of life." During menopause, which usually occurs between the ages of 45 and 55, a woman's body slowly makes less of the hormones estrogen and progesterone. A woman has reached menopause when she has not had a period for 12 months in a row, and there are no other causes for this change.

Eighty-five percent of the women in the United States experience hot flashes of some kind as they approach menopause and for the first year or two after their periods stop. Hot flashes are mostly caused by the hormonal changes of menopause, but can also be affected by lifestyle and medications. A diminished level of estrogen has a direct effect on the part of the brain (hypothalamus) responsible for controlling your appetite, sleep cycles, sex hormones, and body temperature. Somehow, the drop in estrogen confuses the hypothalamus—which is sometimes referred to as the body's "thermostat"—and makes it read "too hot."

The brain responds to this report by broadcasting an all-out alert to the heart, blood vessels, and nervous system: "Get rid of the heat!" This message is delivered instantly. Your heart pumps faster, the blood vessels in your skin dilate to circulate more blood to radiate off the heat, and your sweat glands release sweat to cool you off even more.

This heat-releasing mechanism is how the body keeps from overheating in the summer, but when the process is triggered instead by a drop in estrogen, your brain's confused response can make you very uncomfortable. Some women's skin temperature can rise six degrees during a hot flash.

Together with progesterone, another female hormone made by the ovaries, estrogen regulates the changes that occur with each monthly period and prepares the uterus for pregnancy.