

# Facts on Perimenopause, Menopause, and Hormones



## Who should read this?

Women who are . . .

- *in perimenopause (the years around the time of menopause)*
- *already in menopause*
- *past menopause and are concerned about osteoporosis and heart disease*



**M**enopause, the end of menstrual periods, is the transition between a woman's childbearing and non-child-bearing years. It usually occurs between the ages of 47 and 55 when the production of female hormones (estrogen and progesterone) stops. Hormonal levels can begin to decrease as early as age 35 starting "perimenopause," which may cause irregular bleeding, hot flashes, insomnia, and mental confusion. Some women experience more troubling problems, like occasional loss of bladder control (incontinence), dryness of the vagina, and pain during sex. Lower estrogen levels also increase the risk of heart disease and osteoporosis (thinning bones).

## How to stay healthy before, during, and after menopause

- **Follow a healthy balanced diet.**
  - ✓ Eat less fat and cholesterol-rich foods.
  - ✓ Eat less animal protein.
  - ✓ Eat more fiber, such as whole grains, beans, fruits, vegetables, and soy.
- **Make physical activity and exercise part of your routine.** Daily physical activity reduces your risk of heart disease and helps maintain strong bones. Exercise can also lower your risk of breast cancer. We recommend that you

try to get 30 to 60 minutes of exercise (like walking or gardening) on most days of the week.

- **If you smoke, quit now.** Smoking is a major risk factor for heart disease and reduces bone strength. If you smoke, ask your doctor, nurse, or health educator to help you quit.
- **Use alcohol in moderation.** Alcohol can also reduce bone strength. Experts recommend that women drink no more than one alcohol drink each day. Ask for our information sheet about alcohol.
- **Take adequate amounts of calcium and vitamin D.** Women need 1,200 mg of calcium and 400 to 800 I.U. of vitamin D every day. Most take less than half of this amount. Dairy foods like milk, cheese, and yogurt are the best natural sources of calcium. As a general rule, you need to eat about three servings of dairy foods every day, or take a calcium supplement.
- **Reduce stress by taking time for yourself.** Women tend to take care of everyone else, but don't make time for themselves. Treat yourself to relaxation periods throughout your busy schedule to renew your energy and to help create a positive attitude.



## Schedule and take these three important screening tests

1. **Pap test** to screen for cervical cancer
  - if under 30, every one to two years
  - if over 30 and Pap is still normal, Pap/HPV test every three years until age 65 (after, decide along with doctor or other medical professional)
2. **Mammogram** to screen for breast cancer
  - every one to two years beginning at age 40
3. **Flexible sigmoidoscopy** to screen for colorectal cancer
  - every 10 years after age 50

If you have special health needs or risks, you may need to test more often. Ask your doctor or nurse for additional information.

## What about hormone therapy?

Hormone therapy pills and skin patches increase levels of estrogen and progesterone in your body, helping to reduce most of the unpleasant symptoms of menopause, such as hot flashes and vaginal dryness. Estrogen is combined with progesterone to eliminate your risk of uterine cancer. If you have had a hysterectomy, you will be prescribed estrogen alone. If your symptoms are very bothersome, you may want to consider hormone therapy for a short time (one to three years) to help manage those symptoms.

According to the recent results of a large study, longer use of hormone therapy may increase your risk for a variety of serious medical conditions. Those conditions include breast cancer, heart attack, stroke, and blood clots in the lung and leg. Although the increased risk is small, it is significant. We now recommend that you consider natural ways to manage your symptoms before trying hormones. If you are unsure what to do, we recommend that you attend a menopause class or group appointment or talk to your physician or other medical professional at your next appointment.

## How do I decide what to do?

Carefully review your medical history and re-examine your personal values and beliefs. You will then be in a position to determine your goals and how best to achieve them. For example, some women choose only lifestyle changes, like diet, exercise, and relaxation. Others favor herbal remedies and acupuncture. And still others prefer to use medication. The choice is up to you.

## How can I prevent osteoporosis?

It is important that all women take calcium (1200 mg) and vitamin D (400 to 800 I.U.) to prevent osteoporosis, particularly at the time of menopause. Women who are at high risk for osteoporosis (over age 65, slender, family history of osteoporosis, or fracture over the age of 45)

should talk with their physician or medical professional about other possible treatments. Several new drugs (including Evista and Fosamax) can prevent osteoporosis without increasing other health risks. These newer drugs do not relieve symptoms of menopause, such as hot flashes.

## Alternatives to hormone therapy

Some women find that certain botanical, herbal, vitamin, and nutritional supplements help reduce menopause symptoms. Herbs and supplements are sold over-the-counter. Kaiser Permanente carries only herb categories for which some evidence exists to show that the herbs may be effective to treat certain medical conditions. For more information about supplements and their effects, call or visit your local Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center.

### Other resources

- See the “Menopause” section of your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Visit the Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center nearest you.
- Visit our Web site at [www.kp.org](http://www.kp.org).
- Call the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone at 1-800-332-7563. Request tapes #431 (Menopause) and #444 (Hormone Replacement Therapy).
- Request a copy of *Menopause . . . A Kaiser Permanente Guidebook for Women* from your physician or other medical professional.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other medical professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult your doctor. If you have questions or need additional information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse any brand names; any similar products may be used.