



## Who should read this?

Women who are . . .

- in perimenopause (the years before the time of menopause)
- already in menopause
- past menopause and concerned about bone loss (osteoporosis) and heart disease

The end of a woman's menstrual periods is called Menopause. It marks the transition between a woman's child-bearing and non-child-bearing years. It usually occurs between the ages of 47 and 55 when women stop producing female hormones (estrogen and progesterone). But hormone 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 keep bones strong. Exercise can also lower your risk of breast cancer and may lessen the hot flashes and insomnia which can happen during this time in a woman's life. 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 increases your risk of developing 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 and has been associated with a higher risk of breast cancer. Experts recommend that women drink no

more than one serving of alcohol each day. Ask for our information sheet about alcohol.

- **Take adequate amounts of calcium and vitamin D.** Women need 1,000 mg of calcium before menopause and 1,500 mg after menopause as well as 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 four 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.

4. **Stool Hemoccult Blood** testing every 2 years between ages 60 and 79. Take this simple home test in addition to the flexible sigmoidoscopy every 10 years.

## 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 has been connected to a small increase in your risk for breast cancer. There is also a small risk of stroke and blood clots in the lung and leg at any time while taking hormones, and an increase in heart disease in women who start hormones at age 59 or older. Although these risks are small, they are significant. We 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 better able 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 (1000-1500 mg) before and after menopause and vitamin D (800 I.U.) to prevent osteoporosis, particularly at the time of menopause. Women who are at high risk for osteoporosis (over age 65, or with 2 of the following risk factors: smoking, slender, immediate family history of hip fracture or a history of a fracture yourself when over the age of 45) should talk with their physician or medical professional about other possible treatments. There are other drugs (including raloxifene and

alendronate) that can prevent osteoporosis while avoiding some of the 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.

### Additional 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 [kp.org](http://kp.org).
- 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.