



Sexuality - the private parts

A women's relationship with her body and her views about her sexuality may change as menopause approaches. Hormonal changes during perimenopause and at menopause could affect you emotionally, potentially making you more interested in having sex, or causing you to lose your desire altogether. Physical changes to the vaginal area are also frequently a concern. Up to 50 per cent of postmenopausal women report experiencing some vaginal dryness, soreness or painful sex. Often bladder trouble accompanies these changes.

There is something you can do. A variety of medical and non-medical treatments and approaches are available to help perimenopausal and menopausal women sustain a healthy sex life and positive self-esteem.

Can I expect to have a healthy sex life after menopause?

Yes! While there are many factors that can affect your sex life after menopause, many women and their partners find that their sexual relations continue to be very satisfying after menopause. In fact, research shows that sex after menopause can actually have a good therapeutic effect. It increases the blood flow to the genital area which is good for the long term health of the sexual organs. Some women experience reduced vaginal lubrication and this can readily be addressed with over-the-counter lubricants and/or a vaginal estrogen cream.

If you have specific concerns, talk first with your partner, and then make a decision about seeking professional counsel.

My sex drive seems to have disappeared. Is this normal?

Many women experience ups and downs in terms of sexual interest over the years as pregnancies, child care responsibilities and fatigue take their

toll. So it is not unusual for women to report a decreased sex drive after menopause, or to feel sadness and a sense of loss. And yet others experience a greater sense of sexual freedom once concerns about pregnancy are gone. And for some, their partner may have health concerns, or the changes in sex drive are not a concern. The good news is that all of these feelings are normal and even though the sex drive may be less strong, for the most part, women do report that they are able to respond to their partner and have pleasurable experiences.

Sometimes sex is more painful for me now. What can I do about it?

There are many conditions that can contribute to pain with sex. It may be related to reduced vaginal lubrication, or other physical changes in the vagina. If you experience pain during sexual relations, you should talk to your doctor.

How can I get my partner involved in talking about changes I am experiencing in terms of my body and my sexual feelings?

Both women and men experience changes and anxieties associated with their sexual relations as they age. As sensitive as these issues may be, couples need to find a way to keep the lines of communication open in order to keep their sexual relations healthy. You may feel the need to talk to health professionals qualified to provide advice in this area; to make a difference, they will want to understand what each partner is experiencing physically and emotionally.

If I have had a surgical menopause, will my sex life change in any way?

It is possible. Women who have had their ovaries removed may benefit from testosterone supplements, since their testosterone levels will likely go down. Since testosterone is linked to sexual feelings, taking it may help to restore desire.

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What can I do about vaginal dryness?

As hormone levels decline at this time of life, there can often be a direct impact on the tissues, muscles, glands and functions of the vagina and urinary tract. Vaginal dryness can be a menopause symptom, even for women receiving hormone therapy (HT). There are a variety of over-the-counter lubricating products available to help with this condition, along with vaginal estrogen creams that a physician can prescribe. If dryness worsens and leads to pain or discomfort, you should consult a physician or health professional.

What is local hormone therapy and how can it help me?

Local hormone therapies (HTs) use creams or devices that address a specific menopause problem such as vaginal dryness. These therapies are called “local” because they do not involve a medication that is taken by mouth. Vaginal creams containing estrogen are a local HT that help to ease vaginal dryness. Vaginal rings and suppositories may also be prescribed.

Women have a lot of questions about the emotional and physical changes that occur during perimenopause and as they reach menopause. The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada (SOGC) has developed a range of information resources for women. Of course, your family physician, gynaecologist or obstetrician is your best front-line resource for the questions you may have about menopause.

Visit www.menopauseandu.ca for more information about menopause and other women’s health issues.