



Symptoms - is it hot in here?

Menopause comes with a range of physical and psychological changes, though some women may be symptom-free. The main goal needs to be managing those changes so they don't affect quality of life. These days women have options so menopause symptoms don't get in the way of our active lives.

What are the most common symptoms of menopause?

Every woman has a different experience, but menopause symptoms can include:

- hot flashes
- mood and memory changes
- changes to skin texture and appearance, including thinning and wrinkling
- sleep disturbances
- loss of vaginal lubrication
- reduced sexual desire and interest in sexual relations
- bladder control difficulties
- fatigue
- joint pain

What is hormone therapy (HT)?

Hormone therapy (HT) may be prescribed when the ovaries stop doing their job of producing a natural balance of female hormones.

An HT program may involve using estrogen alone (ET), or an estrogen-progestin (EPT) combination, depending on what is happening in a woman's life and health. Women who have had a hysterectomy are usually given estrogen alone. Progestin has the advantage of providing protection to the lining of the uterus from endometrial cancers.

Hormone therapies can involve a medication taken by mouth, or a skin patch or gel for symptoms such as hot flashes. Other hormone therapies are applied right where there is a problem – for example, a vaginal cream, tablet or

ring, can restore estrogen in the vaginal area and is used when vaginal symptoms are a problem.

HT is usually prescribed for women with moderate to severe menopause symptoms, or for women who go through a surgical or unexpected menopause

Will hormone therapy (HT) deal with all of these symptoms?

Hormone therapy is prescribed to address a number of menopause symptoms, and is based on a careful assessment of a woman's health status and the seriousness of her symptoms. We do know that:

- Some menopause problems (such as hot flashes and vaginal dryness) are almost entirely caused by the drop in hormones, so they can be greatly relieved by HT treatment.
- A combination of factors can contribute to sexual changes, fatigue, sleep disturbances and memory changes; thus the positive impact of hormone therapy varies between women.
- Estrogen protects skin from thinning and wrinkling, but physicians do not recommend HT for this purpose alone.

What are the risks associated with hormone therapy (HT)?

The risks associated with HT depend very much on a woman's personal health status. Her overall health, her family history and her age can have an impact on the risks she needs to think about. New health research is providing insights all of the time. So assessing risk needs to be done with the support and guidance of a health professional. Still, research and experience does tell us that:

- There is a small increase in the risk of blood clots in the veins.

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- The risk of stroke is of some concern to older women and those with high blood pressure.
- A greater potential incidence of heart disease for women who start HT after age 60.
- There is some evidence that the risk of breast cancer increases for women who use HT for an extended post-menopausal period. The good news is that the risk of breast cancer returns to normal in long term users soon after they stop taking HT

When considering HT and the risks, it is important to remember that this therapy is usually offered to women to give them better quality of life. For some diseases HT actually reduces risks and offers protection.

Is it true that menopause may affect my mood?

Women may notice some changes in their emotions and moods during perimenopause (the timeframe that precedes menopause when a woman is still menstruating) or when they have reached menopause. Irritability, tearfulness, anxiety, depression, lack of motivation and poor concentration are all symptoms that some women may experience. Sleep disturbance over a prolonged period can lead to mood changes. Serious mood disorders can be treated with anti-depressants, sometimes in combination with hormone therapy. Women can also find help from trained mental health professionals who offer “cognitive” therapy, also known as “talk” therapy, which can address current or longstanding problems and concerns.

I have read a lot about the use of natural products to treat menopausal symptoms. Where can I get more information about those options?

A range of non-hormonal therapies (some that require prescriptions, others that do not) are available in the marketplace. Research continues in the search for additional menopause therapies that will give women more choices. For example, complementary and alternative medicines, including black cohosh and red clover, may be recommended to ease hot flashes and night sweats.

Unfortunately, there is very little data about the long term effectiveness and safety of these products and therapies so it is a good idea to talk to a health care professional you trust.

More information about alternative menopause treatments is listed at www.menopauseandu.ca.

Are there other treatment options for hot flashes?

All menopause symptoms should be discussed with a health professional, but common sense tells us that anything that helps reduce the body’s core temperature (e.g. a fan or loose fitting clothing, cold drinks, ceiling fans) will help women suffering from hot flashes. Since some women can experience dramatic temperature changes in a short time frame, it is also a good idea to keep a shawl or sweater handy to deal with a sudden chill.

Equally, lifestyle changes (exercising more, quitting smoking) and relaxation techniques may also be helpful when dealing with sleep disruptions, night sweats and hot flashes. There is no research to show that acupuncture or reflexology can help menopause symptoms.

What is the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists’ position on hormone therapy?

Canadian obstetricians and gynaecologists agree that hormone therapy (HT) is safe for women who are experiencing a reduction in their quality of life due to the symptoms of menopause. The increased risk for a woman using HT remains extremely small.

The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada (SOGC) recommends in the 2006 Menopause Consensus Report that hormone therapy may safely be prescribed in the dose and for the duration necessary to bring relief, **unless** a woman has a specific risk factor for a particular disease or health condition. The Society recommends that health care providers regularly review the risks and benefits associated with a program of HT with their patients. Emerging advice is suggesting that for women under age 60 HT is a safe and reasonable choice.

Women have a lot of questions about emotional and physical changes during perimenopause and 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.