

Midlife Crisis?

Midlife is a time of change, excitement, turmoil and joy. Women may find themselves experiencing a complex combination of both physical and emotional changes in the years leading up to the major midlife transformation of menopause. The years leading up to this are called perimenopause. For some women this only lasts for a few months, but unfortunately for others it can last for years.

The average age of menopause is 51. It is considered premature when it occurs before the age of forty. (The definition of menopause is simply being period free for 12 months.) The symptoms of menopause can include hot flashes, vaginal dryness, mood swings, insomnia and irritability. Only your doctor can determine if you have reached menopause. He or she can perform a blood test to measure your FSH (follicle stimulating hormone) which gives you a snapshot of your hormones at that moment.

Perimenopause however, can be difficult to diagnose. It's a section of life that mirrors adolescence in its fluctuating state of hormones that affect the way women think, act and feel. Perimenopause can be a period of turmoil and has been referred to by some women as "PMS times ten". Research shows that women with PMS symptoms that are extremely uncomfortable will most likely suffer through their perimenopausal phase as well.

In my women's health practice, it seems that the majority of women complaining of perimenopause are in their late 30's or early 40's. This means women may need to cope with the emotional and physical mayhem for many years. This hormonal "rollercoaster" occurs as the ovaries begin to slow down and ovulation doesn't occur every month. Estrogen levels fluctuate and progesterone declines so women will find themselves often in an "estrogen dominant" situation with symptoms such as breast tenderness, bloating, water retention, headaches, weight gain (around the middle especially), irritability, depression, joint pain, and increased incidence of uterine fibroids. At other times, estrogen levels may be relatively low (especially in relation to estrogen) leading to hot flashes or night sweats, insomnia, vaginal dryness, memory and concentration problems, dry skin, fatigue and decreased libido. (These symptoms are characteristic of menopausal years.)

Proper nutrition, regular exercise and plenty of sleep are the first steps to coping with perimenopausal symptoms. Eat a diet that is low in fat, high in fibre (helps to metabolize estrogen) and includes plenty of colourful vegetables, whole grains and lean protein. Keep alcohol to a minimum (no more than 1 drink per day) and avoid white foods (i.e. white flour, sugar) and processed foods. Exercise for 20 to 50 minutes 3 to 4 times per week and get 6 to 8 hours of sleep each night.

Some physicians may also prescribe low dose oral contraceptives (birth control pills) to help "regulate" those irregular periods, as well as provide contraception. (Remember that since you are still menstruating, albeit irregularly, you are still capable of becoming

pregnant!) Hormone replacement therapy, especially *bio-identical hormones*, is helpful to regulate periods and relieve many of the symptoms.

Certain vitamins may also be supportive for menopausal and perimenopausal symptoms. B vitamins, evening primrose oil, vitamin D with calcium and magnesium as well as certain herbs such as red clover, soy supplements and black cohosh may relieve many of the symptoms, although they don't necessarily help to restore hormone balance. Always be sure to consult your health care provider before using any herbal or natural supplement.

Surviving midlife or the perimenopausal years is possible. With a little common sense and a healthy lifestyle women can sail through the years gracefully.