

Menopause and the vagina

Many women will have some degree of discomfort in their vagina during and after menopause. Common vaginal symptoms of menopause include vaginal dryness, itching and irritation. These problems can be bad enough to have a negative effect on your sex life and relationships (eg, dryness in the vagina can lead to painful or uncomfortable sexual intercourse), and reduce your general enjoyment of life. Vaginal symptoms of menopause will not get better by themselves, but luckily they can be easily managed.

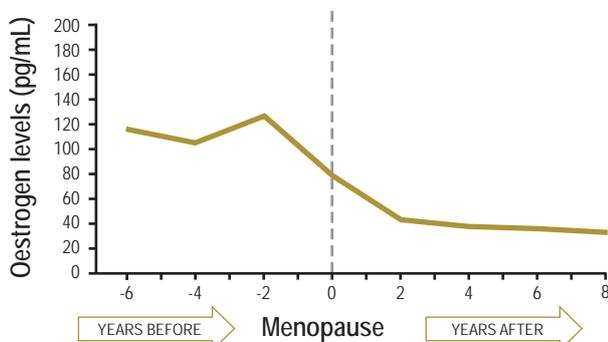
Menopause: a time in a woman's life when her periods have stopped. Usually occurs naturally between the ages of 45 and 55, but can happen earlier.

Changing hormones and vaginal health

As you age and go through menopause, changing hormone levels in the body lead to changes in your vagina. During menopause, low levels of a hormone called oestrogen make your vagina and urethra (where you pass urine) drier (due to less lubricating secretions), and the lining thinner and less elastic. Drops in oestrogen levels and changes in vaginal health may occur with:

- natural menopause (a time in life when the body naturally produces very little oestrogen)
- surgical menopause (as a result of removal of the ovaries, which causes a big drop in oestrogen levels)
- medical menopause (as a result of medical treatments that cause a drop in oestrogen levels).

Changes in oestrogen levels in the years before and after menopause



Vaginal symptoms of menopause

Low levels of oestrogen and resulting changes in the vagina can lead to any of the following symptoms:

- vaginal dryness
- vaginal itching
- vaginal burning
- unpleasant vaginal discharge
- discomfort or pain during sex
- frequent vaginal infections
- frequent bladder infections.

Important: these symptoms can also be due to other medical issues such as infection (eg, discharge) or thrush (eg, itching, burning or discharge) so a visit to your doctor is important.

Your vaginal health may begin to bother you in the years leading up to natural menopause. It may also become a problem several years into menopause. Unlike some menopausal symptoms, such as hot flushes, which may get better over time, vaginal symptoms may get worse.

Vaginal symptoms of menopause are very common, so you should not feel that you are alone. However, each woman's experience is different, and menopause does not result in vaginal symptoms in all women.

Less frequent and absent periods are part of menopause, but other period changes such as bleeding between periods, bleeding after sex or very heavy periods are not part of menopause and need to be investigated. **Any bleeding/ blood spotting after your periods have stopped at menopause (post-menopausal bleeding) is not normal and you need to see your doctor for investigation without delay.**

Seeking help

If you suspect that you are having any vaginal symptoms of menopause, you do not need to put up with them as most symptoms are easily treated. Your first step should be to speak to your doctor or pharmacist. Do not be embarrassed to discuss your vaginal symptoms. Health professionals are used to dealing with such issues, and will be able to help you.

Any vaginal bleeding after menopause (ie, a year or more after your periods have stopped) needs to be investigated, so it's important to see a doctor if this occurs.

Treatment options

Your pharmacist or doctor may recommend that you try:

- a vaginal moisturiser to reduce general vaginal dryness and discomfort
- a water-based lubricant to reduce discomfort during sex
- an oestrogen cream or tablet to place inside your vagina and relieve the range of vaginal symptoms.

Pelvic floor exercises can also help with the vaginal or urinary symptoms of menopause.

If you have mild vaginal symptoms of menopause, regular use of vaginal moisturisers and lubricants may provide sufficient symptom relief. If you have more severe or a wide range of vaginal symptoms, a vaginal oestrogen cream or tablet is likely to be the best treatment option for you. Vaginal moisturisers and lubricants are available from your pharmacist without a prescription. Vaginal oestrogen creams and tablets must be prescribed by your doctor.

You place oestrogen cream or tablets directly into the vagina with an applicator at bedtime. Your doctor or pharmacist will tell you how much cream to use, and how often to insert the cream or tablet into the vagina. You must follow these instructions carefully. If you are unclear about anything, you should ask your doctor or pharmacist for advice. It may take several days or weeks before you notice an improvement in your symptoms. During treatment, you should continue to see your doctor at least once a year for check-ups.

Important: If you have tried products from the pharmacy and your symptoms have not gone away, see your doctor for a check-up.

What else can you do?

A few simple lifestyle changes can also help to minimise vaginal symptoms of menopause:

- wear cotton underwear
- go without underwear when possible (eg, in bed)
- avoid wearing tight-fitting leggings, jeans or trousers that may lead to sweating
- limit time in damp or wet swimming togs or exercise clothes
- wash clothes with fragrance-free or sensitive skin laundry products
- avoid use of scented toilet paper, scented bath products, feminine hygiene products
- do not attempt to clean the inside of the vagina (douche)
- gently wash the outer part of the vagina with water and a mild, unscented soap or soap alternative, and pat dry

Additional information

For more information on menopause and vaginal health, you may contact a local branch of the Family Planning Association of NZ. The Association runs menopause clinics, and their doctors and nurses can offer support and advice. Clinic locations and contact details can be found at www.familyplanning.org.nz.

Original material provided by The Health Media

This information is intended solely for New Zealand residents and is of a general nature only. No person should act in reliance on any statement contained in the information provided, but at all times should obtain specific advice from a health professional. All rights reserved. © Copyright 2018 The Health Media Ltd. No part of this publication may be reproduced without the written permission of the publisher, Phone +64 9 488 4286.