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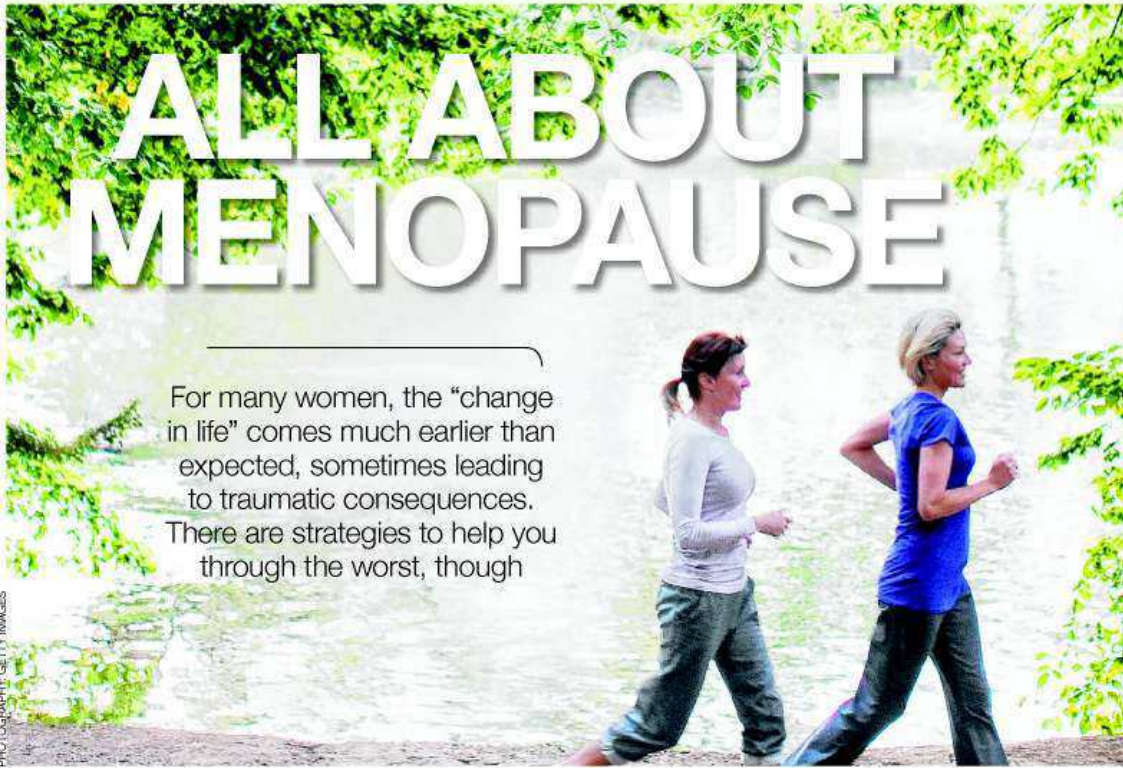
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By naturopath **Emma Sutherland**

**M**enopause occurs when a woman's periods have stopped for more than 12 months or follicle-stimulating hormone levels are highly elevated.

During menopause, levels of oestrogen, progesterone and testosterone decline as ovulation ceases. The average age for menopause to occur is 51.5.

Perimenopause, when hormone levels begin to fluctuate, can occur up to four years before menopause, producing symptoms such as hot flashes, sleep disturbances, low libido, weight gain and mood changes.

We look at the two most common symptoms and how to treat them.

**Hot flashes**

These are due to small blood vessels in your skin dilating and you may also feel

your heart race and become dizzy, sweaty and anxious. Hot flashes can occur as little as once a week or as often as every five minutes. They can be worse at night.

The first step is to cut out caffeine, alcohol and spicy foods. Caffeine activates the adrenal glands, which results in a surge of the stress hormones, adrenaline and cortisol. This will exacerbate hot flashes and deplete your body of nutrients such as magnesium and B vitamins. Alcohol also puts a strain on your liver, which is responsible for breaking down fats

You can also take herbs to support your body, such as zizyphus, shatavari and sage. Homeopathic remedies such as lachesis, sepia and ignatia can help

**Low libido**

As levels of testosterone decrease your libido can take a nose dive. Your skin can become thinner and drier, which often results in vaginal dryness and painful intercourse.

The first step is to increase your intake of omega-3 fatty acids. Take fish oils and evening primrose oil daily and eat avocado regularly.

The herb Tribulus terrestris is my favourite for increasing libido and zinc supports your hormones.

Try using a natural lubricant for sex such as coconut oil or eggwhite.

There are also key things you can do for a symptom-free menopause.

- + Ensure you have good stress-management techniques. As your ovaries stop producing oestrogen, the adrenal glands become your reservoir for oestrogen production. If your adrenals are exhausted, you're more likely to experience menopausal symptoms.
- + Begin resistance exercise.
- + Eat smaller, low-GI portions.
- + Eat a Mediterranean diet.
- + Eat more menopause-friendly foods such as fish, natural yoghurt, quinoa, broccoli, cabbage, tahini, almonds, pomegranate and oats. **C**



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## THE THREE STAGES OF MENOPAUSE

**1 Perimenopause** This refers to the time from the onset of menopausal symptoms to 12 months after the last menstrual period. It can last up to five or six years.

**2 Menopause** This is said to have occurred when the ovaries have ceased functioning and there has been no menstruation for a year.

**3 Post-menopause** Begins one year after the last period. There is no way to predict how long this phase will last, but for many women it will resolve within a few years.





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## EARLY MENOPAUSE

By Sharon Labi

**A**lmost one in 10 women will go through early menopause before the age of 40, robbing them of the choice of starting or completing a family, and playing havoc with their bodies. Before the age of 40, this is called premature menopause. For women aged 40 to 45, it is early menopause.

For one in 100 women, their ovaries will spontaneously fail but the figure climbs to eight in 100 once surgery and chemically induced menopause (due to chemotherapy or radiotherapy) are taken into account.

For up to 80 per cent of women whose ovaries spontaneously stop working, the cause is unknown, says Melbourne endocrinologist Dr Amanda Vincent, a council member of the Australasian Menopause Society.

In a minority of cases, it can be caused by a genetic disorder such as Turner's syndrome, an autoimmune disorders, inborn metabolic problems such as galactosaemia and rarely, as

a result of viral infection.

"If you're a smoker or have a family history of early menopause, you're at greater risk. Having a hysterectomy or pelvic surgery can also be risk factors," Dr Vincent says.

### The symptoms

The most common symptoms are hot flushes and vaginal dryness, says Dr Ted Weaver, president of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists.

Other symptoms include itching under the skin, reduced libido, urinary frequency, tiredness, depression and sleep disturbances.

"The loss of libido can have a devastating effect, not only on the woman but on her partner," sexual health expert and author Dr Rosie King says.

### Diagnosis

Dr Vincent says diagnosis of premature menopause can take from six months to several years because women have such variable symptoms. "Often, doctors don't think about premature menopause as a possibility when a woman comes to them in her 20s or 30s and her period has stopped."

Other reasons a woman's period may have stopped need to be excluded, such as pregnancy, thyroid problems or prolactin issues.

"A lot of women have very few symptoms, so diagnosis might be missed," Dr Weaver says.

### The effects

Early menopause affects young women physically and psychologically. One of the most devastating moments is when a young woman is told she won't be able to have children.

"Early menopause, particularly for women who haven't >

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started their family, can be a catastrophe," Dr King says.

Dr Mandy Deeks, a psychologist with the Jean Hailes Foundation for Women's Health, says for these women, the issue is more that a choice has been taken away from them.

"There are impacts on sexual function and body image, and a woman who's had surgically induced early menopause is more likely to be anxious or depressed," Dr Deeks says.

"You're not going through menopause when your friends are and suddenly you're a young woman in an old body."

Dr King agrees it's a sign of ageing: "They're not prepared for it. It can be a tremendous shock and it affects your self-image."

### Fertility

Women who undergo early or premature menopause can no longer have children. An egg donor is the only option and unless you have a willing sister or friend, they are hard to come by in Australia, where it is illegal to pay a donor.

Some women go overseas to buy an egg, says Professor Michael Chapman, IVF expert and head of Women's and Children's Health at the University of NSW.

"South Africa, Spain and Greece are reputable," he says.



"It's \$12,000 to \$15,000 per cycle, with a better than 50/50 chance of pregnancy."

The US is another option but it is more expensive.

One approach is putting a woman on the contraceptive pill for six weeks to suppress her pituitary hormones and when she comes off the pill, she can sometimes get what is called rebound ovulation.

"It's very ineffective, probably only a two to three per cent chance at best," Professor Chapman says. "But against nothing, it's an approach."

Women needing surgery or chemotherapy to treat cancer can undergo an assisted reproductive cycle, where their ovaries are hormonally stimulated and eggs collected. The eggs can then be fertilised with her partner's sperm and the embryos frozen. Women with no permanent partner can freeze eggs, but the technology is new and success rates unclear.

Ovarian preservation is where a woman is given a hormone

called GnRH agonist to cause a chemical temporary menopause during chemotherapy, with the idea that once chemotherapy is complete and the hormone stopped, the menstrual cycle should return.

### Other implications

Women who go through premature or early menopause are at greater risk of osteoporosis, which can lead to bone fractures. There is also a higher risk of cardiovascular disease, because they don't have the protective benefits oestrogen provides the heart.

### Other treatments

The 2002 Women's Health Initiative (WHI) study reported increased risk of heart disease and breast cancer with combined hormone-replacement therapy (HRT) use

But Dr Vincent says the average age of women in the WHI study was 63 and the benefits and risks of HRT are quite different for younger women.

"The general consensus of the menopause and endocrine societies around the world is that a woman with premature menopause, unless she has a contra-indication to oestrogen, such as breast cancer, should take HRT until the age of 50." ☺

## WAYS TO MANAGE PREMATURE AND EARLY MENOPAUSE

- + Eat a healthy, well-balanced diet.
- + Exercise regularly.
- + Avoid smoking.
- + Get a referral to a

psychologist to learn techniques such as paced breathing to help reduce the intensity and frequency of hot flushes.

- + Make lifestyle changes such as ensuring your comfort with a cooler environment and wear layers of clothing.