

MENOPAUSE

What is menopause?

The term menopause refers to the last natural menstruation of women.

The time preceding menopause is called *perimenopause* and can last for several years (up to 10 years) while the 6 to 12 months after menopause are called *postmenopause*.

Menopause is a natural stage of life, a physiological phase caused by the progressive ceasing of ovarian activity, which gradually stop producing hormones.

Reduced hormone production and inability to induce ovulation lead to irregularity in the menstrual cycle and to reduction of fertility, until menstruation stop definitely.

What age does menopause start?

Spontaneous (natural) menopause occurs at various ages.

Generally the average onset is around 50 years (between 45 and 53), but in some cases it can occur before (*premature menopause*) or after (*delayed menopause*).

Is there an induced menopause?

Natural menopause depends on the physiological decrease of ovarian activity. If a woman undergoes an ovariectomy operation, a *surgical menopause* occurs.

Menopause can also be *induced* by particular diseases, or by chemotherapy and radiotherapy treatments.

Symptoms of menopause

Typical symptoms are: hot flashes, night sweats, insomnia, irritability, depression, anxiety, vaginal dryness, urinary incontinence, decreasing libido. All these symptoms have a great influence on the well-being and life quality of women. A long-term problem that can arise during menopause is osteoporosis, in which loss of oestrogen hormones, very important for bone protection, weakens the bone structure.

With menopause the level of oestrogen hormones, and to some extent also androgen hormones, decreases; this causes a progressive decadence of genitalia (vagina, clitoris, outer and inner labia),

and sometimes also lowering of libido. Oestrogen reduction causes dryness, loss of elasticity and lubrication and fragility of the vagina.

Intercourse can become painful (*dispareunia*) often preventing the achievement of orgasm.

Hormone Replacement Therapy

The therapy is aimed at integrating hormones typical of fertile age, which the woman's body is not able to produce any more. It is a hormone-based therapy.

Hormone replacement has to be prescribed by a doctor only to women showing symptoms and with no contraindications to the therapy. The therapy is recommended also in early menopause cases.

Although it is used mainly to treat menopause symptoms, hormone replacement therapy can have positive effects on the bones, protecting them effectively from osteoporotic fractures; it is good practice to complete the treatment with Vitamin D and calcium.

Hormone replacement therapy can improve quality of life in menopausal women, especially those with symptoms that have a negative influence on their quality of life. Remember that hormonal therapies are contraindicated in case of : previous suspected or confirmed breast cancer; other suspected or confirmed hormone-dependent cancers (cancer of the endometrium); non diagnosed vaginal bleeding; recent or current trombo-haemolytic diseases or thrombophlebitis; serious hepatic diseases; cardio-vascular and cerebrovascular diseases.

What to check during menopause?

It is better to ask your doctor to prescribe a list of tests to be taken regularly: gynaecological examination, Pap test, colposcopy, pelvic sonography, mammography and/or breast sonography, bone densitometry, hematochemical tests.

It is also important to adopt a correct lifestyle, a healthy diet, limit alcohol intake, stop smoking, and carry out a regular physical activity.

The present material does not intend in any way, directly or indirectly, to define or change therapies which remain under the exclusive responsibility of doctors. Indication included in this publication cannot substitute the doctor's prescriptions. Consult your doctor before deciding to change anything in your lifestyle.