

Menopause

DESCRIPTION

Menopause is a naturally occurring event in a woman's life. It is the process of the ovaries stopping hormone production, which stops the release of eggs and stops the menstrual cycle. It is a point in time, around 52 years of age, when the woman has gone 12 consecutive months without a menstrual cycle. Menopause can also be a result of surgery or medical treatment; this is called induced menopause.

STAGES

There are 3 stages in menopause, the perimenopause stage, menopause, and postmenopause. Perimenopause begins 8-10 years before menopause, usually starting in your 40s, and can last from several months to several years. It is when the ovaries slowly produce less estrogen. You may experience symptoms like irregular periods, mood swings, and hot flashes. Menopause is when you have no period, no longer produce eggs, and produce very little estrogen. It is a defined moment; you do not stay in this stage. Postmenopause is after menopause, you will stay in this stage the rest of your life. Menopausal symptoms usually lessen in this stage, but they can continue for several years after entering postmenopause. You are at an increased risk for osteoporosis and heart disease because of the low estrogen production when you are in the postmenopause stage.

SIGNS/SYMPTOMS

Women may be entering menopause if they experience some or all the following symptoms: irregular periods, hot flashes, night sweats, vaginal dryness that causes discomfort during sex, urinary urgency, difficulty sleeping, emotional changes, dry skin, dry eyes, dry mouth, worsening premenstrual symptoms, and breast tenderness. Some also experience racing heart, headaches, joint and muscle aches, changes in libido, difficulty concentrating, weight gain, and hair loss or thinning.

DIAGNOSTIC STUDIES

There are two ways to diagnose menopause, the first way to diagnose is by talking with your healthcare provider about your menstrual cycle over the last year. Once you have gone a full 12 months (consecutively) without a period then you have entered menopause and are considered postmenopausal. Blood tests can also be used to check hormone levels and diagnose menopause, but blood work is usually not necessary unless your doctor suspects an underlying health condition.

PREVENTION AND TREATMENT

Menopause is not a preventable event but there are interventions to relieve some of the symptoms. Hormone therapy is an option for naturally occurring menopause (after age 45). Hormone replacement therapy for those experiencing menopause before age 40. Lastly, there is nonhormonal therapy like changing diet, getting regular exercise, joining support groups, cognitive behavioral therapy, and more.

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