

Mastering the

MENOPAUSE

More than half of the world's population will go through the menopause in their lifetime; however, we are still learning how best to support women during their tumultuous hormonal upheaval. Stigma, embarrassment, insufficient research and ineffective treatment options can unite to leave many women suffering mentally and physically. Most women may have a general idea of what to expect from the menopause. Hot flushes, irregular periods, moodiness. What many don't realise, or read about, is how disruptive, intense and severe some of these symptoms can be.

You have probably heard of the seven dwarfs of the menopause, those being the most commonly reported or spoken about symptoms. Itchy (your skin as well as vaginal area), bitchy, sweaty (those hot flushes), bloaty, sleepy (and we mean lack there of), forgetful and psycho!

But what didn't you expect? Severe headache or migraine. Bouts of nausea and dizziness. Crying at criticism, at imagined slights, at the television. Or being angry and sharp, irrationally boiling with rage over really small things. Fluctuating from tearful to snappy in an instant. And then there are myriad other relatively minor things – forgetfulness, poor concentration, weight gain, aches and pains, fatigue.

There can be a storm of physical symptoms and emotions too, such as:

- Irritability
- Wild, unpredictable emotional responses exceeding the gravity of the situation
- Anger, anxiety, excessive worry
- Decreased energy
- Low self-esteem
- Sadness and depression, tearfulness
- Loss of concentration (brain fog), forgetfulness, memory loss
- Insomnia – difficulty falling asleep and/or staying asleep
- Loss of libido.

Your changing biology can collide with socio-economic changes (work commitments, promotions, retirement, family expenses, children's education), as well as family, psychological and relationship stresses.

Worries about performance at work with brain fog, changes in your sexual relationship due to decreased libido and discomfort, or fear of someone noticing the sweat pouring down your face during a hot flush will make anyone feel on edge. Fluctuating hormone levels can cause anxiety and the strain may exceed your coping mechanisms. The combination of this psychological distress, the physical changes happening in your body, and the resulting turmoil in your relationships leave many women vulnerable to mood swings, depression and anxiety.

It may not be easy to embrace your body and mind's changing landscape. Finding the courage to break the silence and to advocate for your wellbeing will help you better weather the storm of the menopause. Education about what may help reduce symptoms may make the world of difference and there are some things that can help.

As oestrogen levels decline, your risk of weight gain to obesity, cardiovascular disease, osteoporosis, urinary stress incontinence and vaginal prolapse increases. Regular physical activity is crucial for women facing the menopause. It can:

- **Prevent weight gain.** Women tend to lose muscle mass and gain abdominal fat around the menopause. Regular physical activity can help prevent weight gain.
- **Reduce the risk of cancer.** Exercise during and after the menopause can help you lose excess weight or maintain a healthy weight, which might offer protection from various types of cancer, including breast, colon and endometrial cancer.

- **Strengthen your bones.** Exercise can slow bone loss after the menopause, which lowers the risk of fractures and osteoporosis.
- **Reduce the risk of diseases.** Menopause weight gain can have serious implications for your cardiovascular health. Excess weight increases the risk of heart disease and type 2 diabetes. Regular exercise can counter these risks.
- **Boost your mood.** Physically active adults have a lower risk of depression and cognitive decline. It can also help reduce stress and anxiety and improve sleep.

Specific physical therapy exercises, including Kegel exercises, can help combat urinary stress incontinence and vaginal prolapse. Exercise isn't a proven way to reduce menopausal symptoms, such as hot flushes and sleep disturbances. However, regular exercise can help you maintain a healthy weight, relieve stress and improve your quality of life.

Take control by knowing and understanding your symptoms and why this is happening. Take control by knowing what treatment options you have to manage the symptoms and prevent any negative long-term consequences after the menopause, such as weight gain, osteoporosis, cardiovascular disease and diabetes. Take control by talking about it and getting guidance to preserve and strengthen relationships over this time. It can save you a lot of worry and uncertainty, and stop you thinking you are becoming a wild, emotionally unstable woman forever!

A difficult menopause can test your confidence, your work, your emotional and personal life. You need to come out the other side having embraced it and focused on YOU – your health and wellbeing for the future.

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