



**R**emember the fairy tale story of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs? Well maybe experiencing the menopause doesn't feel like a fairy tale, but eventually there will be a happy ending on the other side. For now, however, your new best friends are the seven dwarfs Itchy, Bitchy, Sweaty, Bloaty, Sleepy, Forgetful and Psycho (named by Suzanne Sommers in her book on the menopause, *The Sexy Years*). You may have seen this cartoon before in women's health clinics and offices, but is it REALLY true that women turn into such unattractive creatures just because their oestrogen levels dropped? Well to varying degrees in different women, yes.

Anytime from the age of approximately 45, women can start to experience symptoms of the menopause. The most common being these seven described below. The menopause comes about when your ovaries stop producing the hormones oestrogen and progesterone. It can happen quite quickly, and some women experience unpleasant or severe symptoms. Your body's tissues have to adapt to not receiving oestrogen and this can take weeks, months or years. It's different for everyone. Some may have totally different symptoms including headaches or migraine. Each person will experience all or only some of the seven symptoms. Let's introduce you to them, in no particular order, with some tips to help you cope.

### 1 ITCHY

The drop in oestrogen levels can make your skin become drier and itchier, particularly in the vulva (outer part of the female genital) area. Without oestrogen the vaginal and vulval tissues become thinner and more fragile, making them more irritable and prone to infections and skin conditions.



#### Tips:

- Use a cold compress
- Take an oatmeal bath

# Seven Unwelcome Symptoms of the Menopause

- Moisturise your body regularly, most moisturisers are not to be applied to the genital area
- Medications: prescription steroid and anaesthetic creams (specific for use in the vaginal area), antihistamines, hormone replacement therapy (HRT), phytoestrogens
- Try to avoid aggravating the dry itchy skin by:
  - o avoiding hot baths and showers
  - o pat yourself dry rather than rub
  - o avoid scratching and damaging the skin
  - o use scent-free skincare products and soaps
  - o reduce alcohol and nicotine consumption
  - o wear soft, loose clothing
  - o avoid synthetic undergarments, try cotton or moisture-wicking (athletic) underwear.

### 2 BITCHY

Your endorphins – the feel good chemicals in your brain – are sensitive to oestrogen. As hormone levels drop so do your endorphins, with a relative increase in cortisol (a stress hormones). Feeling snappy and irritable with those around you is not uncommon for women. Lack of sleep, depression, work stressors and adapting to changes in your life (such as your children leaving home or planning for retirement) can all compound things.



#### Tips:

- Exercise regularly, this helps increase endorphin levels, your happy chemicals
- Massage can reduce stress and anxiety that may be fuelling your bitchiness
- Yoga
- Meditation and mindfulness
- Try to manage work and family stressors with scheduling and being organised, planning a balanced life with social time (friends and family) as well as YOU time.

### 3 SWEATY

You may only have experienced hot flashes when you last had a bad case of the flu – that overwhelming tidal wave of heat, flushing and sweating that comes out of the blue. Your hormones help regulate the part of the brain that controls body temperature, so during this change your temperature can be up and down without warning day or night. The good news is that this does eventually settle, although the time taken to do so varies between women.



#### Tips:

- Wear loose, light clothes made of natural fibres/fabrics
- Have a fan handy, near your bed or lounge or work desk
- Keep room temperature low – open windows and use air conditioning
- Have a cool shower
- Keep a healthy weight, being over-

weight may exacerbate the hot flushes

- Relax and reduce stress – try massage, meditation, mindfulness and deep breathing techniques.

#### 4 BLOATY

Bloating is that uncomfortable pressure in the abdominal area caused by extra air or fluid in the gastrointestinal tract. It can feel like fullness or tightness, and can be uncomfortable. Bloating can make you seem to have a 'pregnant' tummy at times which adds to your stress of body changes.



Bloating normally has two main causes, water retention or gas retention, both occurring during menopause due to hormonal changes. Becoming less active with age can make bloating worse. Women sometimes blame the menopause for their weight gain (and yes it is a contributing factor for sure) but in many cases decreasing activity levels and changes in diet are the main culprits. The good news is that these can be influenced by your own lifestyle changes.

#### Tips:

- Staying well hydrated helps the gut digest your food
- Exercising regularly can help maintain a healthy digestive tract
- Avoid trigger foods – foods that cause gas retention include some beans, lentils, broccoli, and fatty, fried foods
- Avoid carbonated (fizzy) drinks
- Avoid chewing gum
- Quit smoking
- Reduce salt intake
- Eat probiotics – yogurt, sauerkraut, kefir, and other probiotic foods can promote digestive health
- Reduce portion size to avoid overloading your digestive system resulting in bloating and a back log of a large heavy meal.

#### 5 SLEEPY

Many women report that they struggle to get to sleep during or after the menopause. Hot flushes are often the cause



of this. Insomnia or lack of sleep may mean that you feel tired and sleepy throughout the day. Anxiety and stress, be it from your symptoms, body image, concerns about relationships under strain during the menopause can all affect good quality (and quantity) sleep. In the same vicious cycle, lack of sleep fuels stress and anxiety.

#### Tips:

- Reducing hot flushes may help improve sleep
- Reducing stress and anxiety can improve sleep through massage, or meditation for example
- Sleep routine – go to bed at a regular time each day
- Have a dark, cool bedroom
- Avoid screen time before bed
- Avoid caffeine
- Avoid a heavy fatty meal
- Meditate or use a calming bedtime app
- Try deep breathing exercises.

#### 6 FORGETFUL

Fuzzy thinking, or brain fog, can be one of the most frustrating symptoms women face during their menopausal years. Although lots of women report that they started to become forgetful at this time, there is no direct scientific evidence linking memory problems with the menopause. There is, however, a link between getting older and not being able to remember things as well. Sleep disturbances during menopause appear to contribute to brain fog. Changing levels of oestrogen are thought to have an effect on the brain, as oestrogen contributes to language skills, attention, mood, memory and other brain processes.



#### Tips:

- Exercise may trigger the growth of new nerve cells and blood vessels in the brain
- Physical activity increases the production of chemicals that promote the repair of existing brain cells and the growth of new ones
- A good night's sleep will improve brain fog
- A healthy diet helps fuel the brain

- Food rich in omega-3 fatty acids, and folic acid (found in leafy greens) are essential for proper brain function
- Turmeric in curries or juices is full of antioxidants, which are great for the brain
- Red wine (but don't overindulge) is packed with resveratrol, which may keep free radicals from damaging brain cells
- Reduce your stress levels to clear your thoughts
- Brain games – stimulate your brain with reading, cross words, sudoku, memory games for example, all keep your mind focused, active and engaged.

#### 7 PSYCHO

Yes, we have all heard about knife-wielding menopausal woman. The irritability and mood swings that some women experience, due to fluctuating hormone levels, can be reduced.



#### Tips:

- Medication (be it HRT, or antidepressants for example)
- Massage
- Meditation
- Exercise
- Counselling, getting support and understanding during this time may help balance your thought processes and mood.

**Most of the symptoms of the menopause can be managed and there is no need for your life to become less fulfilling or enjoyable over this time. The menopause may signal the end of your ovaries' active life but your life most certainly doesn't end there...**



Sommers S. *The Sexy Years: Discover the Hormone Connection: The Secret to Fabulous Sex, Great Health, and Vitality, for Women and Men.*

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