

NIH News in Health

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Inside News: 3 Middle-Age Spread 4 Alzheimer's Blood Test 4 ADHD 4 Drug Use and Addiction

Managing Menopause Navigating a Challenging Transition

Hot flashes. Trouble sleeping. Sudden changes in mood. Problems with your bladder. Pain during sex. These are all common but uncomfortable symptoms of the transition to menopause.

Menopause isn't a disease or disorder. It's a normal part of a woman's life. Menopause marks the end of menstrual cycles and fertility. Even though it's a natural process, the transition to menopause can be difficult for some women.

Researchers have been working to better understand menopause. Today, women have more options than ever before to help them feel healthy during and after this midlife transition.

Starting the Transition • The ovaries contain all of the eggs at birth they will ever contain. The menstrual cycle controls the monthly release of eggs until menopause. The menopausal transition starts when this process changes and production of **hormones** like estrogen begins to decline. Most women start this transition (also called perimenopause) in their late 40s. But it can happen earlier or later.

During this time, women may experience certain symptoms, such



as changes in their periods and hot flashes. If a woman hasn't had a period in 12 months, she can say she's entered menopause. But for many women this transition is less clear.

"Around one in eight women enter menopause because of a medical intervention, like having their ovaries removed surgically," says Dr. Sarah Temkin, a women's health expert at NIH. If this happens, they enter menopause suddenly, with no transition. The bothersome symptoms that they experience are often more significant than if they had entered menopause naturally.

If you haven't had a period in a year, blood tests can verify that you've reached menopause. But no test can confirm when you've begun the transition into menopause. If you have symptoms, your doctor may order tests to rule out health conditions.

The menopausal transition usually lasts around seven years. But it can be shorter or longer. Women who don't want to get pregnant should

still use birth control for at least 12 months after their last period.

Cooling Hot Flashes Down • Many women experience only mild symptoms during perimenopause. For others, symptoms are severe and can interfere with work and life. The most common are called vasomotor symptoms. These include hot flashes and night sweats (see the Wise Choices box).

"A lot of symptoms can be interrelated," says Dr. Andrea LaCroix, a menopause researcher at the University of California, San Diego. "If you have hot flashes, they might interfere with your sleep. Then once you get sleep deprived, you don't feel so good overall."

If you have mild hot flashes, you may be able to manage them with lifestyle changes. These include dressing in layers that can be removed, carrying a portable fan, and avoiding alcohol and caffeine.

Women with severe symptoms now have several drug options to consider. Some women can safely use menopausal hormone therapy, or MHT. Two decades ago, hormone therapy for women in the menopause-

continued on page 2

Definitions

Hormones

Substances sent through the bloodstream to signal another part of the body to grow or react a certain way.

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continued from page 1

al transition fell out of favor. Doctors had concerns about the risk of breast cancer, heart disease, stroke, and blood clots from hormone therapy. These concerns were based on a large study that tested hormone therapy to prevent chronic disease in older women. The study showed higher chronic disease risk for some women taking MHT.

More recent studies have confirmed these findings but also found that healthy, younger women who use MHT don't have the same increased risk as older women. Talk with your health care provider about the potential risks and benefits if you're considering MHT.

Some women can't use hormone therapy because of certain personal risk factors. Others may not want to use it. "But there are other treatment choices," says LaCroix.

LaCroix and others have found that an antidepressant called escitalopram can reduce the number and intensity of hot flashes for some women. Recently, a new drug called fezolinetant was approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for treating hot flashes. It works

by acting on part of the brain that regulates temperature.

"All of these treatments have been found to be helpful, so women have choices," LaCroix says.

Tackling Other Symptoms •

Many women struggle with sleep during the menopausal transition. Studies have found that a type of talk therapy called cognitive behavioral therapy, or CBT, can help women with sleep problems during this time of their lives.

Physical activity, yoga, and mindfulness can also help women feel better, stronger, and more in control of their reactions to many symptoms, LaCroix explains, even though these strategies likely do not directly impact the number or severity of hot flashes.

Some women experience sexual problems during their transition. These can include vaginal dryness, painful sex, and reduced desire. Others have heavy or irregular bleeding, Temkin explains. Many of these problems have treatments women can try. But women often don't know about these options, she says.

"There's a huge amount of stigma about women talking about their reproductive health," Temkin says.

"Women sometimes feel, going through the menopausal transition, that they're in it alone," agrees Dr. Chhanda Dutta, an aging expert at NIH. "And while women experience this transition in very different ways, they need to be aware that they're not alone."

NIH-funded researchers created a website to help women better understand their experiences. It's called MyMenoplan.org. It has tools to help you track symptoms and compare potential treatments.

Health in Midlife and Beyond •

Lifestyle changes can help you stay healthy during and after midlife.

The risks for some health problems go up after menopause. These include heart problems, bone weakness, and diabetes. Whether this is due to menopause or the overall aging process isn't clear.

"But the advice is the same as for all through our lives," Dutta says. "Focus on good nutrition. Get good sleep. Manage your stress levels. Be physically active."

Such lifestyle changes can help reduce some menopausal symptoms and boost overall health, Dutta says. This can help women feel as healthy as possible from day to day. ■



Wise Choices

Transitioning Into Menopause?

Perimenopause symptoms can be different for everyone and include:

- **Changes in your period.** Periods happening very close together or farther apart than usual; heavy bleeding or spotting; periods that last for more than a week.
- **Hot flashes.** A sudden feeling of heat in the upper part or all of your body.
- **Night sweats.** Hot flashes that happen during sleep.
- **Sleep problems.** Trouble falling asleep or staying asleep.
- **Bladder issues.** Sudden urges to urinate, or urine leaking during exercise, sneezing, or laughing.
- **Changes in vaginal health and sexuality.** Vaginal dryness; discomfort or pain during sex; changes in sexual desire.
- **Mood changes.** Feeling moody or more irritable; feelings of anxiety or depression.
- **Changes in body composition.** Muscle loss or fat gain; skin can become thinner; joints and muscles may feel stiff or achy.

NIH News in Health

ISSN 2375-6993 (Print) ISSN 1556-3898 (Online)

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Web Links

For more about menopause, see "Find More Information" in the online article: newsinhealth.nih.gov/2024/10/managing-menopause

Stopping Middle-Age Spread

Maintain a Healthy Weight as You Age

If you're an adult in the U.S., you can expect to gain 10 to 25 pounds between your 20s and your 40s. Starting between ages 30 and 40, you may find losing weight and exercising more challenging. The exercise you do may not have the same effect as before. It's not necessarily a sign that something is wrong. This weight gain in middle age—known as “middle-age spread”—is a natural consequence of aging.

“Your **metabolism** tends to slow down as you get older,” says NIH’s Dr. Rafael de Cabo, an expert on aging. “But your appetite and your food intake do not. So, you have a steady increase of body weight with age.”

Much of the weight gain comes in the form of fat tissue. The distribution of fat in your body also shifts. There's less under your skin and more around your internal organs. Meanwhile, you start to lose lean muscle with age. Many people also become less active as they age, especially if they have a job that involves a lot of sitting. This can lead to further fat gain and muscle loss.

Those extra pounds have consequences beyond your clothes not fitting. The risk of many chronic diseases, such as diabetes, heart disease, and **neurodegenerative diseases**, goes up with age. Excess weight can further heighten these risks.

Definitions

Metabolism

Chemical changes in the body that create the energy and substances you need to grow, move, and stay healthy.

Neurodegenerative Diseases

Diseases in which nerve cells stop working or die.



Fortunately, you can take steps to maintain a healthy weight as you age. Your diet can play a key role. Having a slower metabolism means you'll need fewer calories. But you also want to make sure you still get all the nutrients your body needs. For tips on healthy eating as you age, see go.nih.gov/NIHNIHOct24Nutrition.

De Cabo studies the effects of dietary changes on health and longevity. One example is intermittent fasting, in which meals are interspersed with long fasting periods. For example, you might limit eating to only eight hours per day. Studies suggest intermittent fasting may help some people to eat less and keep weight off. But De Cabo and others have been finding that it might also have benefits for your metabolism.

His work has shown that mice live longer and stay healthier when they go for long periods between meals. This was true even if they were eating the same amounts and types of foods as mice that ate whenever they wanted. Other studies have

also suggested that periods of fasting may bring benefits beyond weight loss.

Physical activity is important for combating the changes that come with aging, too.

“The key is to maintain an active lifestyle,” de Cabo says. “Try to incorporate daily walks or daily visits to the gym. If you have an office job, get a standup desk, so you spend a few hours a day standing instead of sitting. Small doses of exercise throughout the day will help tremendously.”

For more suggestions on how to fight age-related weight changes, see the Wise Choices box. ■



Wise Choices

Small Steps to Fight Middle-Age Spread

- **Commit to a healthy diet.** Focus on nutrient-dense foods such as fresh fruits, vegetables, whole grains, seafood, lean meats, eggs, legumes, nuts, and seeds.
- **Drink plenty of liquids.**
- **Move more.** Every minute counts. Take the stairs and add walking breaks to your day. Experts recommend getting at least 150 minutes of moderate activity a week.
- **Get plenty of sleep.**
- **Limit alcohol use.**
- **Avoid tobacco products.**
- **Visit the doctor regularly.**



Web Links

For more about middle-age spread, see “Find More Information” in the online article: newsinhealth.nih.gov/2024/10/stopping-middle-age-spread



Health Capsules

For links to more information, please visit our website and see these stories online.

Accurate Blood Test for Alzheimer's Disease

Older adults who are worried about their thinking, memory, or reasoning skills may want to get tested for Alzheimer's disease. But current tests are invasive and expensive. One type uses a sample of spinal fluid. Another uses expensive brain imaging. These tests can't be done in primary care clinics, which limits access for many people.

To address these issues, researchers have been trying to develop blood tests for Alzheimer's disease. These measure proteins that spill from the brain into the

bloodstream. In a new study, researchers looked at how well a blood test, called PrecivityAD2, works for detecting Alzheimer's.

The team collected blood samples from more than 1,000 people who were concerned they might have Alzheimer's disease. The scientists then compared the blood test results with those from either a spinal-fluid test or imaging scan. They also compared the blood test with an evaluation performed by doctors.

The blood test predicted a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease

with about 90% accuracy. In contrast, evaluations done by doctors picked out only about 60% to 70% of Alzheimer's cases.

"The next steps include establishing clear guidelines for how an Alzheimer's blood test can be used in clinical practice," says Dr. Oskar Hansson from Lund University in Sweden, who helped lead the study.

While it is sold in the U.S., the test is not yet approved by the FDA. More studies are needed to verify how well the test works in more diverse populations. ■

What Is ADHD?

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a condition that first appears during childhood. It can last into adulthood. ADHD can lead to a wide range of ongoing symptoms that interfere with friendships, schoolwork, and daily life.

Some people with ADHD find it hard to pay attention or remember important things, like daily chores. Others may be hyperactive and have trouble sitting still or staying calm. They may act impulsively and have difficulty with self-control. For

example, they may interrupt others or act without thinking.

Anyone can have ADHD. But it's more common in males than females. Boys and men tend to have more hyperactive and impulsive symptoms. Girls and women are more likely to have symptoms of inattention. Some people have all types of symptoms.

The causes of ADHD are unknown. Genes likely play an important role. Scientists are exploring whether other factors—like nutrition or a person's social environment—also contribute.

There is no cure for ADHD. But treatment can help reduce symptoms. Treatment may include medication, psychotherapy, education, school-based programs, or a combination of these.

Some adults with ADHD are not diagnosed until later in life. They may have trouble getting organized, completing projects, or keeping appointments. It's never too late to get diagnosed and treated for ADHD.

To learn more about ADHD, visit go.nih.gov/NIHNIHOct24ADHD. ■



Featured Website

Drug Use and Addiction

nida.nih.gov/research-topics

Get plain and simple facts about drugs and addiction. Learn how different drugs affect the brain, including over-the-counter and prescription drugs.

Find out about who's at risk for substance use, what happens to your brain during addiction, and the importance of prevention.

Research Topics

The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) is the largest supporter of the world's research on substance use and addiction. Part of the National Institutes of Health, NIDA conducts and supports biomedical research to advance the science on substance use and addiction and improve individual and public health. Look below for more information on drug use, health, and NIDA's research efforts.

Information provided by NIDA is not a substitute for professional medical care.

Research by Substance
Find evidence-based information on specific drug and substance use disorders.
Alcohol
Cannabis

Drug Use and Addiction
Learn how science has deepened our understanding of drug use and its impact on individual and public health.
Addiction Science

People and Places
NIDA research supports people affected by substance use and addiction throughout the lifespan and across communities.
The Addiction Brain and Substance Use

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