When Does Menopause Start Exactly?

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It would be beneficial if there were a National Office for Menopause Notifications (NOMN) which could email you with an advanced notice of oncoming menopause.

A bit like delivery companies, NOMN could ask you to choose a convenient time for the arrival of your menopause and you could plan ahead for it.

Sadly, Mother Nature doesn't have an email account, so even in these high-tech days we largely have to conclude that menopause is likely by reading our own body's signs.

This can be incredibly stressful, especially if you are still hoping to extend your family so how can you find out when your menopause is really on its way or here already?

Firstly, it's useful to understand what defines menopause and perimenopause.

Is It Perimenopause or Menopause?

Perimenopause is the time *before* menopause is diagnosed. Most people incorrectly refer to this period as menopause.

It's when menstruation often becomes irregular, heavier or lighter and the first symptoms most people associate with menopause first start to show.

Menopause officially starts when you have gone a full 12 months without any sign of a menstrual period. This can be years after perimenopause symptoms first appear. It can be tricky as many women experience long gaps between bleeds, very light bleeds or even just spotting. This is completely normal during perimenopause.

Any bleeding, even spotting, which happens after the full year without periods is almost certainly harmless but should always be checked out by a doctor as unexpected bleeding in menopause can occasionally indicate potentially serious medical conditions.

What Age Does Menopause Start?

The window for menopause to start is probably more significant than you'd expect.

Many women assume they will be in their 50's and in fact the average age for women in the US to enter menopause is 51, but it can start much earlier or later in some cases.

You may have heard reports of women in their 20's or 30's being diagnosed with menopause, but this is

unusual. Menopause in women aged under 40 is classified as premature menopause or premature ovarian insufficiency.

Between 45-55 is the most common age range for menopause so women who are assuming they can leave starting or extending their family until later in life should be aware than perimenopause can impact fertility.

Women who have female relatives who started menopause earlier than the average should take this into account as menopause starting ages often run in families.

What Are The Early Symptoms of Menopause?

Early symptoms of menopause can be subtle. Maybe your periods have become a little heavier or lighter, or the gap between them has lengthened or become erratic. That lifelong 21-day cycle has become 10, 35, 60, or 12 days.

Doctors needing to diagnose menopause will find it useful to have details of how your menstrual cycle has been in recent months so it might be helpful to download a menstruation tracking app on your phone or tablet. Most will offer the facility to track start dates and duration and even allow you to mark how heavy your flow has been on each day.

Some apps even offer the option to forward charts through email or to print off spread-sheets so you can have all the information forwarded to your physician.

Hot Flashes

One of the biggest giveaways, of course, is hot flashes but although these are common, not all women encounter them or find them bothersome. Look out for times when you are uncomfortably hot when others are feeling cool or even cold or sudden changes in your perceived temperature. Hot flashes can often be linked to stress. Hot flashes often strike at night and perimenopause is usually the time when some women encounter sleep issues for the first time in their life.

Lack of Sleep

Lack of sleep, whether it’s due to hormone-related insomnia or hot flashes, can impact mood and since menopause can affect how we feel too, it’s important to recognize feeling low, anxious or depressed. Don’t be too embarrassed to seek help especially if these feelings affect your life, work or relationships.

Libido Changes

Changes to sex drive are also noted during perimenopause. Hormone changes leading to lack of lubrication or desire coupled with sleep issues and mood changes can play havoc with your love life. It’s important to communicate how you are feeling to your partner who may be confused and hurt by your apparent loss of interest.

Changes to the Skin and Hair

Other subtle hints include changes to your skin which might become dry or greasy – some women complain they break out with spots like a teenager.

Other women report changes to their hair also becoming dry or conversely greasier than usual. Your usual hair dyes, shampoos, conditioners and other products might not work in the same way. Hair might become brittle, thinner or even patchy. Obviously, age-related hair changes can cause color and texture changes, but it’s hormones causing these other issues.

Try milder products and if possible book yourself in for a review with your usual colorist and stylist to help you

decide how best to care for your crowning glory without damaging your precious tresses.

How Can I Tell If I Am Definitely In Perimenopause Or Menopause?

Typically perimenopause and menopause don’t need to be officially diagnosed, but in some cases, your doctor might feel it worthwhile to run tests, especially if any medication is required.

They might carry out blood tests to check levels of Follicle Stimulating Hormone (FSH), and estrogen as FHS tends to increase while estrogen levels decrease during perimenopause.

There are also home test kits available which you can pick up online or from the drugstore. These are usually simple “pee on a stick” or dip strip tests which indicate FHS in urine. They are not always conclusive however as levels fluctuate and higher FSH can indicate ovulation – some fertility tests are designed to detect FHS.

If you are managing your symptoms, there is o need to seek medical confirmation or assistance for perimenopause or menopause.

However, there are many ways to ease troublesome symptoms ranging from lifestyle changes, counseling, prescription drug and alternative therapy help so don’t be scared to seek help. No one needs to “suffer” menopause.