The Impact of Menopause on Your Sex Life

by AMY MANLEY

Menopause and Sex Drive

Menopause is one of the most significant changes a woman will go through in her life. Intimacy during menopause can be challenging to maintain and is a chief concern for many women throughout the process.

However, the notion that menopause will end your sex life is a myth. Some women experience a decrease in libido while others report a surge in interest in sex which sounds like a good thing but can come as an unwelcome shock for their partners.

There is some good news, many women have used a variety of techniques to maintain intimacy during menopause, both physically and emotionally.

How Menopause Affects Sexual Health

Hormones play a crucial role in sex drive, and since menopause affects your hormones, it's no wonder that menopause and sex drive are related.

The hormones estrogen and testosterone change not only the way your body looks but also your mood and sex drive – and during menopause, the levels of these hormones in your body plummet. As a result, during (and after) menopause, many women find themselves both less aroused and less sensitive to the touch of their partner.

Also, low estrogen levels may cause:

- Vaginal dryness (because the blood supply to the vagina is decreased)
- Painful intercourse
- Incontinence
- Sleep problems
- Stress
- Mood swings

Some medications such as antidepressants are also known to be linked to sexual dysfunction.

There are other medical health conditions such as vaginal, bladder or rectal prolapse which can render intercourse difficult or impossible for some women. You might avoid prolapse, but bladder or urinary tract infections are more common in menopause which is not exactly sexy and can be very painful.

Not to mention bladder leakage can also be a problem for some women who might then avoid intimacy for fear of an accident or odor.

Mental Health and Libido

Depression, anxiety, and stress can all have negative effects on libido and on relationships, which can affect a couple’s sex life.

It might be that depression is disrupting sleep, causing body image issues or performance anxiety.

Even if you don’t have depression, concerns about your changing body, sadness at the loss of fertility and anxiety about the future (which may merely coincide with menopause rather than be caused by it) can put stress on you. It might be that as children are flying the nest, you have taken on more work, or are caring for aging relatives.

Is It Normal to Have a Change in Sex Drive?

Sex drive and desire varies from one individual to another and depends on personal preferences, past experiences, culture and biological makeup. If you've felt that your sexual drive has decreased recently, consider visiting your doctor.

Many doctors see patients with complaints of symptoms that affect their ability to have or enjoy sex. In women, these symptoms may include vaginal dryness, which can lead to painful intercourse, depression or irritability, and low energy.

The sexual response consists of four phases:

1. Desire
2. Arousal
3. Orgasm
4. Resolution.

The doctor's treatment plan will depend on which of these phases is affected.

Recognizing and Talking About Your Sex Drive Changes

It's important to remember that arousal is not all about the physical actions but the emotional side. The best thing you can do is recognize there is an issue, swallow any embarrassment and share your feelings with your nearest and dearest.

Talk With Your Partner

You don’t necessarily have to go into graphic detail but explain that you are having some issues which are almost certainly related to your age, stage or life and that you plan to tackle it, and hopefully with their support.

What Is Causing Your Decrease in Sex Drive?

The next step is to look at exactly what the issue is and see if it’s something that might be helped by a change in life.

Too busy and stressed for a love life? Look at cutting something from your schedule even if that means being a little selfish. Or maybe you can get help, share the load of caring for someone or running that committee/club/team to ease pressure on you.

Just making small changes might see you sleeping better, eating better if you have more time to prepare healthy food and enjoying some “me” time in a way you find relaxing.

Don't Forget to Relax

If sleep and relaxation are a real issue try changing your bedtime routine – ditch the screens in the bedroom and avoid caffeine or alcohol just before bed.

You could try getting some regular, enjoyable exercise to tire you out – exercise also produces “feel good” endorphins which can lift your mood naturally.

Next page: Keep reading to learn how you can maintain intimacy in your relationship and more information about menopause and sex drive.

Recognizing and Talking About Your Sex Drive Changes

Talk With Your Doctor for Help

Don't be afraid to ask your doctor for help if you aren’t coping. It might be that counseling or medication or a mixture of both could restore the real you.

Visiting the doctor is your first stop for any physical problems of course. There is no need to suffer in silence and if embarrassment is your problem always remember they are trained to listen without judgment and have almost certainly heard or seen it all before.

If you really can’t face speaking about your problems, you could write down a list of symptoms and hand them over, or brief your partner to speak on your behalf during the appointment.

What to Do With an Increase in Libido

For the women who find their libido suddenly surges it’s equally important to keep communicating with your partner who might be bewildered by your sudden sexual demands.

Sometimes the change in libido is hormone related, but sometimes it can be a combination of factors. The sudden realization that birth control is not an issue or as children start to become more independent, the joy of less hands-on work changing diapers and making meals and more time for romance.

Maintaining Intimacy Despite Menopause

Vaginal dryness can be easily treated with lubricants such as K-Y Jelly and/or moisturizers like Replena. Hormone replacement may also be recommended in some cases, while psychotherapy can help with stress and mood problems associated with menopause.

Positive Thinking

Gynecologist and bestselling author Christiane Northrup, MD, suggests that you can reignite your sex drive without other treatments because the brain is the most prominent sex organ in the body. Sometimes it just takes a conscious choice to maintain intimacy, she says.

Northrup explains the importance of nitric oxide (NO), a compound that is involved in erectile function, for women. In menopausal women, nitric oxide is low, and by boosting this chemical, you can improve your sexuality and sensuality. It is easy to increase nitric oxide – positive thinking, daily exercise, meditation and having sex regularly can all improve the NO levels.

You can learn more by reading her books, for example, "The Secret Pleasure of Menopause" or "The Wisdom of Menopause and Women's Bodies. Women's Wisdom."

Maintaining Emotional Intimacy

Maintaining emotional intimacy in relationships is just as critical to your overall psychological health as maintaining physical intimacy.

Emotions may overwhelm you during menopause, and sudden mood swings can strain your relationship. Your partner may not understand what you're going through and may turn to anger out of frustration.

Additionally, some women notice that during menopause their partners initiate sex far less. According to experts, men can experience a feeling of panic when their partner is going through menopause; it provokes the realization that they too are getting older.

The tremendous emotional and physical changes that happen during menopause can be exacerbated if a woman's partner is unable to relate to her, or if there is a breakdown in communication.

During times of conflict, it's difficult to express yourself without starting an argument. Take the time to sit down and discuss menopause with your partner and how it is affecting you – and them; a little understanding goes a long way.

In Conclusion...

Menopause is just a bump in the road, and you will soon be back to your old self. With some initiative from you and your partner, you can get your intimacy back and find that your relationship is closer than ever before.