Early Signs of Menopause

by ANGELA FINLAY

Adjusting to Hormonal Changes

It’s very difficult to predict exactly when you will begin menopause, but there does seem to be a genetic connection: many women find that they undergo the changes of menopause close to the age that their mother experienced the transition. Hot flashes, dry skin, headaches and irritability are common early signs of menopause, but menopause is only officially diagnosed after you haven’t had a period for 12 consecutive months. Until you reach that point, there’s a lot you can do to stay comfortable, healthy and informed about the changes ahead.

Premature Menopause or Perimenopause?

When menopause occurs before the age of 40, doctors refer to the change as 'premature menopause'. In this case, all of the predictable menopause symptoms pop up, often beginning with irregular periods, hot flashes and fatigue, and leading to mood swings, trouble sleeping and vaginal dryness. The symptoms can be blamed on drastic ovarian hormone fluctuations, signaling the end of your fertile phase.

In contrast, perimenopause refers to the period leading up to menopause, and that can be much more vague and drawn out than you'd imagine. Beginning anytime between age 30 and age 60, perimenopause lasts for an average of 4 years, but can be as short as a few months or as long as a decade. Along with hot flashes and irritability, irregular periods in the perimenopause phase are one of the first indicators that menopause is on its way, but since the ovaries continue to release eggs, you may still be able to conceive.

Easing the Transition

Although the move into menopause is inevitable, there are many ways to make the transition more comfortable. You’ll need to address your changing hormones, your perspective, and perhaps your routine, but a few little changes can help you cope physically and emotionally:

- **Encourage estrogen –** If you’re beginning to notice symptoms of menopause, you should visit your doctor to have your estrogen levels checked. If the results show that your estrogen has dropped, consider giving your body a boost with some natural estrogen sources: foods like soy, flax, beans and peas provide “phytoestrogens”, which mimic estrogen’s effect in your body. Many fresh fruits and veggies bring a variety of other estrogen-encouraging vitamins and compounds, like vitamin C, complex B vitamins and carotene.

- **Avoid hot flash triggers –** Experiencing hot flashes is one of the most common – and most uncomfortable – symptoms that hit early and tend to stick around throughout menopause. While you probably can’t get rid of them completely, some women find that spicy foods and caffeine can bring on hot flashes, so keep a log of inflammatory ingredients to avoid in the future.
- **Change your outlook –** The stigma of menopause is a thing of the past, and now more women are

approaching the transition with confidence and grace. The symptoms can be hard to deal with at times, but they also don’t have to rule your life: use it as a time to change your style, take up new healthy hobbies, and focus on building emotional and physical strength to counteract the natural challenges that come with hormonal changes.

Eliminating Other Conditions

Since the symptoms of perimenopause can be very similar to some other hormonal conditions, have your doctor conduct a comprehensive medical exam when you begin to notice symptoms. A routine physical exam and blood tests can rule out impostors, like certain thyroid conditions, and can determine if you can use certain medications to help with your symptoms, like hormone therapy (HT), OTC medication, antiseizure drugs and blood pressure medications.