The Link Between Stress and Menopause

by ANGELA FINLAY

Managing Your Stress and Menopause

Women are more susceptible to bouts of anxiety during periods of hormonal upheaval; many will experience a sudden anxious episode for the first time during puberty, pregnancy, or perimenopause. However, stress is difficult to predict, and even more challenging to control when you're living with menopause symptoms – unless you know your risk, and how to stack the deck in your favor.

Since stress (and to some degree, anxiety) is a normal part of life, it can be tempting to ignore the effects, but chronic stress can have serious consequences for your body and mind, especially during menopause. Learn where your stress is coming from and how best to handle it for a better quality of life now, and in the years to come.

Stress and Early Menopause

If you worry about experiencing early menopause, take a look at the stressors in your life – early menopause rests on a variety of factors, and recent research suggests that stress is one of them. Although premature menopause (or, menopause that occurs before the age of 40) has been linked to smoking for quite some time, it seems that socioeconomic status is also to blame.

Researchers believe the stress that comes with economic hardship helps to explain why women in poor regions or communities are 80% more likely to experience early menopause. A recent study out of England reveals that women who live in developing countries experience menopause an average of 8 years earlier than women in North America.

It's not clear whether financial stress brings the same physical response as other types of stress, but experts suspect that stress of all kinds has a penetrating influence on menopause. However, the relationship goes both ways: biological changes that begin in perimenopause commonly bring on bouts of physical or emotional stress, and under some circumstances, those stressful episodes can grow into a chronic stress or anxiety disorder.

The Link between Hormonal Changes and Anxiety

As hormones climb and dip in the years leading up to menopause, the endocrine system falls out of balance. Sex hormones like estrogen and progesterone are significant when it comes to symptoms and wellbeing, but there are other hormones involved in stress regulation and emotional balance. The hypothalamus is particularly important: it regulates cortisol – the hormone responsible for stress response. When too much cortisol is released, severe fatigue, insomnia, irritability and digestive problems can result.

Next page: the link between hormonal changes and anxiety.

The Link between Hormonal Changes and Anxiety

Since the body's stress response can go into overdrive during perimenopause, anxiety during this phase often comes in the form of panic attacks. Different women may experience panic attacks differently, but certain symptoms are very common:

- A feeling of intense fear or impending doom
- Shaking or trembling
- Fast breathing and chest tightness
- Nausea or upset stomach
- Dizziness
- Sweating
- Tingling

The Link between Hormonal Changes and Anxiety

Panic attacks can be terrifying, but are usually quite harmless to your body and mind. But stress and anxiety can manifest in other ways, too. As hormonal imbalance breeds stress, and stress perpetuates hormonal imbalance, you may feel a range of other physical symptoms, like:

- Nervous energy
- Difficulty concentrating
- Worry
- Irritability
- Forgetfulness

Stress is also directly connected to certain menopausal symptoms. For instance, women with high levels of stress are five times more likely to report hot flashes than those living with less stress. Chronic stress and anxiety can lead to other serious conditions, too, like chronic headaches and high blood pressure. In fact, experts estimate that stress is behind 50% to 60% of all medical issues.

How Stress Builds in Menopause

Although hormone levels even out after you've transitioned into menopause, other factors can begin to feed anxiety once physical symptoms start to appear. After all, you are dealing with a life-changing transition that forces you to adapt to a new state, and perhaps a new lifestyle. Between the discomfort, fatigue, introspection, and all of your regular daily duties, it's no surprise that many women struggle with stress.

Next page: beating stress for a better life.

How Stress Builds in Menopause

However, you are more likely to deal with a surge in stress and anxiety if you have:

- **Previous anxiety issues**. Women who have experienced panic attacks in the past are more likely to experience them in the future. However, with proper treatment, many women can drastically reduce their risk of experiencing a second attack.
- **More physical symptoms**. Those who suffer with more uncomfortable symptoms tend to experience more physical and emotional stress, and in turn, are more likely to develop an anxiety disorder. The better you can control your symptoms, the better your chances of controlling your stress level.
- **Negative life events**. Menopausal women who go through a divorce, the loss of a loved one, or a layoff are certainly more prone to anxiety. Since big upsets tend to interfere with sleep and self-care (two

important factors during menopause), they often breed more physical and emotional discomfort.

In severe cases, chronic stress can lead to depression. The constant anxiety coupled with a continuing chemical imbalance is simply too much for the body to fight, and you may find that feelings of isolation, sadness or helplessness begin to take over. Although stress is inevitable for every woman, don't ignore serious warning signs – if you suspect that you may be depressed, talk to your doctor right away.

Beating Stress for a Better Life in Menopause

Stress affects people differently, and you'll need to find your own way to treat it. However, there are a few general ways to approach your stress, and for many women, they promise quick and deep relief.

- **Broaden your support network**. Supportive friends and family are crucial for a better menopause experience, but so are professional counselors and menopause experts. Stay in close touch with your doctor, and consider visiting a behavioral therapist or menopause therapist to help with the finer points of stress management. Stay open and honest to help build an action plan that's well tailored to your personality and unique circumstances.

- **Commit to self-care**. Put yourself first. This means you need to learn to say "no" when you know you shouldn't take on more obligation, and create space and time for yourself each and every day. A bubble bath or a few minutes of deep breathing can be helpful, but be prepared to try new approaches to stress relief and new hobbies that enforce a calm and positive perspective.
- **Live in the moment.** It may be easier said than done, but appreciating your immediate reality can bring you a world of peace and a refreshing perspective. Let go of mistakes from the past and worry about the future, and learn to simplify and focus your thoughts. Mindfulness meditation is extremely effective for centering your mind and letting go our emotional baggage, plus it brings a host of measurable physical benefits.

As you move through menopause, you must listen to your body. Keep track of the types of changes you experience, the rate of change, and anything that seems out of place or particularly uncomfortable. You know your body best, and although doctors and therapists are important, your own monitoring and self-care is what will keep you on the right track to a happier, healthier menopause experience.