

Menopause Wellness

What exactly is the menopause?

The menopause is commonly known as the time in a woman's life when her body's production of the hormones associated with pregnancy and birth cease. Officially, "the menopause" is one year after your last ever menstrual period. Peri-menopause is the phase of life leading up to your last period and can start a number of years earlier. Every woman will go through this process but for each, the experience is a little different and the times at which changes in hormonal levels occur will vary for each of us.

Hormones are at the heart of it all, with the three key ones being oestrogen (estradiol in particular), progesterone and testosterone. As menopause approaches, all three decline dramatically, but rather than a smooth downward slope, hormone levels may spike and then fall, sometimes within the space of a few hours. Their general trend is downwards though and finally, production of hormones from the ovaries and uterus will stop. Once they are gone, they never return and from this point, the female body has to adapt to work without them. The following infographics summarise the many effects of these three influential hormones (image credits: Balance App and Newson Health Menopause Society).

The influence of estrogen



Brain

Body temperature control
Memory
Libido

Heart

Heart rate
Healthy lining of blood vessels
Lower cholesterol

Liver

Cholesterol regulation

Bones

Bone strength

Skin

Collagen production
Reduce moisture loss

Joints and muscles

Anti-inflammatory
Muscle strength
Flexibility
Joint lubrication

Bowel

Maintains function
Helps with gut microbiome

Nerves

Nerve transmission

Bladder

Reduces risk of infection
Controls bladder function

Vagina

Lubrication
Reduces bacterial overgrowth

The Influence of Progesterone

Progesterone Functions

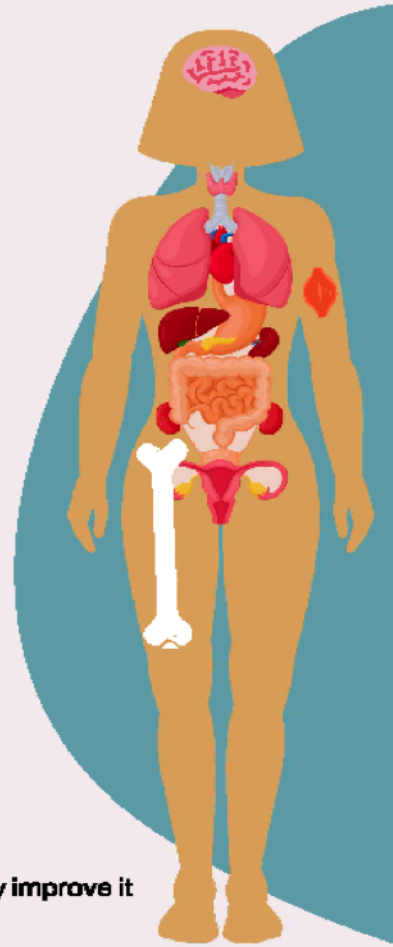
- Secreted mainly in the ovaries
- Prepares the body for pregnancy
- Supports development of fetus
- Initiates menstruation if no pregnancy occurs
- Supports bone formation

Low levels of Progesterone can be associated with

- Fertility disturbance
- Heavy menstrual bleeding/irregular bleeding
- Sleep disturbance
- Anxiety
- Migraine
- Loss of bone density

Taking Micronised Progesterone

- Helps keep womb lining healthy
- May improve sleep
- May improve anxiety
- May lessen migraine attacks
- May reduce hot flushes
- Does not negatively affect blood pressure, may improve it



The Influence of Testosterone

Eye Health

Meibomian gland function and lubrication

Cardiovascular Health

Lowers triglyceride and cholesterol
Improves cardiac capacity and output
Improved endothelial function

Circulation

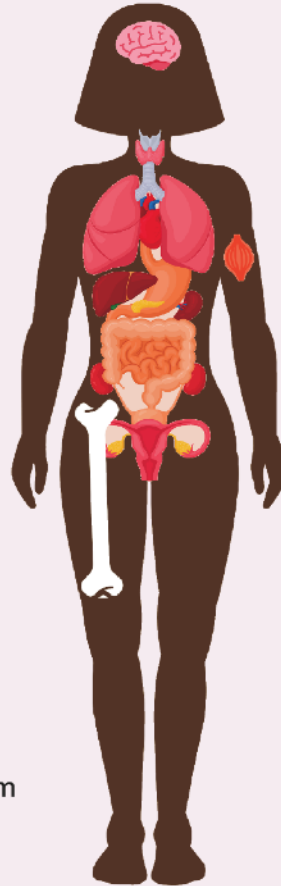
Production of RBCs

Bone Health

Production of bone
Increased bone mineral density

Reproductive and Sexual Function

Libido, arousal and orgasm
Urogenital health



Cognitive Function

Influence on concentration, memory, verbal learning and spatial abilities

Mood

Beneficial impact on psychological wellbeing and energy

Muscle

Restores muscle mass and strength
Makes exercise more efficient

Metabolism

Maintains normal metabolic function (BP, lipids, glucose metabolism)



So the images above give you a picture of just how many functions this triad of hormones perform in a woman's body. It's not surprising then that their decline can play havoc with health. You may already be well-versed with some of the key symptoms reported by many menopausal women during and after this dramatic reduction of female hormones. You're probably trying to manage one or a number of them yourself. Others you may not be aware of as they are less commonly associated with menopause, here are just some of them:

- Change in menstrual cycle (frequency and flow)
- Hot flushes/night sweats
- Sleep disruption
- Anxiety/depression
- Brain fog
- Loss of libido
- Vaginal dryness, soreness or irritation
- Changes in bladder control and function

You may also be noticing:

- Fatigue (as in someone took my batteries out)
- Increase in tummy fat (where did *that* come from?)
- Achy joints, especially around the hips
- Palpitations
- Hair loss
- Change in skin
- Itchiness
- Loss of self-confidence

This rather depressing list could go on to include less visible health concerns that are caused by the menopause and continue to affect women throughout their lives:

- Loss of bone density
- Loss of muscle mass
- Increased risk of heart disease
- Reduced cognitive (brain) function

What can we do about it?

The good news is that there are many approaches for managing the symptoms. The only guaranteed way to replace hormones that the body no longer produces is to supplement them. This can be done via Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) accessible from your General Practitioner (GP). Other supplements do exist, but they tend to be less well-regulated or researched than those available through your NHS doctor, although many women do gain benefit from them.

A woman's choice of therapy to help with symptoms is a very personal decision, but whatever method you choose, it will be complemented by an exercise programme designed with the peri-menopausal and menopausal woman in mind.

Exercise

The online resource pack includes a resistance band workout as well as a core strengthening exercise. Ideas are offered for how to make all of the exercises easier as well as offering ways to increase challenge.

Why is resistance exercise so important?

Resistance exercise takes the form of any movement using some form of weight or resistance. This could be your body weight, a free weight such as a dumbbell, or a stretchy resistance band. The "Is it Just Me?" movement sessions use all of these ideas. The thinking behind the use of resistance exercise during peri-menopause, menopause (and beyond) is that it helps to combat a number of issues related to the natural depletion of oestrogen that occurs at this time. Resistance-based exercise will help to:

- Maintain muscle mass
- Maintain bone health
- Maintain heart health
- Protect against loss of brain function

Muscle mass

Maintaining muscle mass is *not* about body-building, women simply don't produce enough of the right hormones to become muscle-bound hulks. In mid-life, resistance training may actually be about replacing lost muscle tissue given that it starts to decline from the mid-to late-thirties. This decline means that our metabolic rate, or the rate at which we burn calories also drops. This in turn contributes to the accumulation of body fat, as we are simply not burning off the calories we eat and the body therefore stores them as fat. In addition to this, the menopausal body is predisposed to store body fat, particularly around the middle, as this is a source of oestrogen and the body is desperate to replace this depleting hormone. Sadly, this type of visceral fat is linked with many later life health conditions and the type of oestrogen produced by these fat cells is not a helpful one; so managing fat tissue is essential for long-term good health.

Even when at rest, our body uses muscle. The tummy and back muscles for example, are working while you are seated to retain an upright torso and the neck muscles to hold the head upright. The stronger the muscles are, the more calories they burn. Furthermore, following an exercise session, your body will naturally have a higher metabolic rate so resistance exercise increases muscle mass and the

increased muscle mass burns calories even after you finish your workout. It's a win-win for weight management.

Bone health

As well as being very helpful in burning the calories we eat, muscle is also vital for supporting the bones and joints. Strengthening around the knees and shoulders for example will help to prevent ongoing knee pain and issues with the shoulder such as rotator cuff injury.

Working with resistance has also been shown to strengthen our bones. This is especially important for women of small stature, low body weight and with pale complexions.

The rather worrying rate of osteoporotic (fragile bone) fracture amongst post-menopausal women is 1 in 3. If these happen to be hip fractures and occur in later life, they can be significantly life-limiting and definitely best avoided. The body is an amazing machine though and no matter when in our lives we start to take measures to take care of it, we'll still see results. While it is better to build your "bone bank" of strong healthy bones as early as you can in life - one to share with your daughters - even if you start using weights (and perhaps attempting some impact if it is safe for you) when in mid-life, the bones will remodel themselves to become stronger.

Heart health

Working with resistance also helps to lower blood fats (triglycerides), reduce cholesterol and reduce blood pressure, all of which are protective of heart health.

As you will find for yourself, working with resistance can also make you out of breath. Great conditioning for healthy heart and lungs!

Brain function

Although more work needs to be done in this area, a number of studies have found a match between muscle structure and strength and good brain function. What the research does tell us is that depression and anxiety are reduced by any form of exercise, especially if the exercise includes an element of social interaction; for example, at a friendly and welcoming fitness class. It's also worth considering that exercising regularly will help to promote good sleep resulting in benefits to the brain such as greater clarity and improved memory function.

When looking at all the benefits of working with resistance, the case for fitting it into your life is a strong one. Not only will it help to protect against long-term loss of health, it can contribute to reducing more immediate menopausal symptoms. Many women also report that they get fewer hot flushes when they exercise regularly.

Core exercise

Many middle-aged adults report lower back pain, many visit the doctor and some are prescribed pain killers. It is however becoming more frequent for the doctor to advise exercise and strengthening. All the exercises in the online resource pack are tailored to tone the tummy, strengthen the back and be pelvic floor-friendly. Some of the exercises may feel challenging at first, so make sure you take them at your own pace in a well-ventilated space with some water to hand to stay hydrated. Stop if you feel unwell in any way and consult a health professional if you are unsure about the effects on your health. Over time, you will see improvement in your overall fitness, and you will also be protecting yourself from back pain.

Just a reminder that these moves are not intended to be a substitute for regular pelvic floor exercises, they are intended to complement them and make your pelvic floor more functional.

The bigger picture

Exercise and movement are critical parts of the overall solution to managing menopause symptoms and setting yourself up for a healthy later life. There are some other key areas to consider though.

We are what we eat

Good nutrition is essential for getting a healthy balance of nutrients such as calcium and vitamin D to support good bone health. It is also essential to look after your gut biome by feeding the friendly bacteria living there with plenty of plant-based fibre and a diverse range of foods. Prof Tim Spector, gut health expert, suggests we aim for 30 different plant-based foods per week (which can include seeds, nuts and herbs). Check out the Zoe website for lots of fascinating information about nutrition and gut health.

Stress management

High levels of stress mean that your body will make less oestrogen, progesterone and testosterone. While these three players are generally on the decline once peri-menopause starts, your symptoms may be better controlled if your body is naturally making what it can. Stress can also reduce quality of sleep which in turn can increase appetite and influence food choices. Finding techniques that reduce stress levels will have a quiet yet significant influence on your health. Choose the approach that works for you and try a number of different practices. Mindfulness has been shown to be hugely beneficial for dealing with stress, with parts of the brain changing and growing in response to practice.

Hormone replacement

It is also worth considering Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) from your NHS doctor. As mentioned already, this is the only way to

guarantee the replacement of the hormones that decline from perimenopause onwards. A reliable source of fact-based information about HRT can be found on the Balance App and in other publications such as the British Menopause Society website, (www.womens-health-concern.org). There is a lot of information out there once you start to look for it, but be very careful to ensure that the guru you swear by can back up their claims with *good science*.

The last word...

It's a big and complex picture but research demonstrates that by taking regular exercise that includes the use of weights and resistance, you will level up any healthy choices and practices you put in place and in turn, those healthy approaches will pay off in your exercise regime.

So – what are we waiting for?!