



Perimenopause: Are you there yet?

By Dr. Tricia Talerico, D.C., M.S., Nutr.

According to the NIH (National Institutes of Health), perimenopause describes the time in a woman's life when menstrual periods become irregular as she approaches menopause. This can begin 3-5 years (or up to 10 years) before menopause and is often marked by many of the symptoms of menopause, including hot flashes, mood swings, night sweats, vaginal dryness, trouble concentrating and infertility. Physiologically, perimenopause is marked by erratic fluctuations in estrogen which can last up to 10 years. Doctors do not have a great test to diagnose perimenopause due to the daily fluctuations in estrogen. One's symptoms are the key to diagnose here. Did you know that when we are born, we have about a million eggs already stored in our ovaries? By the time we're 30 we are actually down to about 10% of our egg supply. At 40 years old we are down to only 3% of our egg supply! That is why it is so much harder to get pregnant when we are older. I never realized how lucky I was to be able to get pregnant with my third baby at 40! When we are in our 30s and 40s, the amount of estrogen generated by the ovaries begins to erratically decline because of the decline in ovarian function. Cycles can become longer or shorter than what is typical for you or you may even start skipping periods or the flow may become heavier or lighter. Estrogen levels are mostly controlled by two hormones, FSH (follicle stimulating hormone) and LH (leutinizing hormone).

What other symptoms can occur during perimenopause besides menstrual changes? Every woman's perimenopausal experience is unique to her. Some women have no symptoms at all or experience a few minor symptoms or symptoms that are often overlooked or misdiagnosed. Other women can experience a wide range of symptoms that can be quite severe. Looking back at my own journey, I remember waking up in the middle of the night with panic attacks in my mid-40s. My PCP at the time (a male doctor) gave me xanax and never mentioned anything about hormones to me. Unfortunately, I learned many years later that this was my first sign of perimenopause even though I continued to cycle until age 55. Perimenopause can also be marked with symptoms of hot flashes, night sweats, sleep disturbances, mood swings, breast tenderness, weight gain, increased visceral fat/belly fat, loss of sex drive, muscle/joint pain, UTIs, hair changes and forgetfulness. Many women

may also experience a rise in cholesterol levels, putting us at a higher risk for heart disease.

Did you know that every organ system has receptors for estrogen? So, when we look at something like joint pain in perimenopausal and menopausal females, it's important to know that estrogen is an anti-inflammatory hormone in bones and joints. Another symptom that my PCP (female) and an orthoped (female) never recognized in me as a menopausal symptom. They ran several panels for autoimmune diseases and told me to see a rheumatologist when everything came back negative. According to a Duke University study, frozen shoulder or adhesive capsulitis is a very common condition in menopause. Did you know that osteopenia/osteoporosis is completely preventable for most women and most of us don't know that? My ObGyn (female) never mentioned a word to me about hormones when I had my first bone density test and was diagnosed with osteopenia. Very sad. Bone density starts to decrease parallel to the decrease in estrogen. Here's a scary statistic... if you fall and break a hip at age 65, 29% of women will die in the first year after the fracture! Our genitourinary system is also very dependent on estrogen levels. This includes the bladder, vagina and vulva. When estrogen declines, we lose elasticity and stretchability of the vagina. This is why sex can become very painful for some women. This is probably the most common complaint I hear from female clients in my office.

So, what steps can we take as we move from perimenopause to menopause?

Nutrition. Always the best place to start when trying to balance our bodies. Limit caffeine, drink alcohol in moderation, avoid large meals and refined sugar.

Quit smoking. No explanation needed here!

Exercise. It can improve your mood, weight gain issues and hot flashes. It can also help you to maintain or improve your lean body mass.

Get enough sleep.

Supplements. There are some supplements that can be very helpful here. Turmeric, vitamin D, fiber, magnesium, omega-3 fatty acids and B-Complex are a few that I usually recommend.

Talk to your ObGyn about your symptoms and hormone therapy. Believe it or not, there are very few women who would not benefit from estrogen and progesterone. If you get a lot of pushback or resistance, don't get discouraged. Look up "North American Menopause Society", an independent organization of people who care about menopause, do research in menopause and have a certification training program. The website will direct you to certified doctors in your area. If you need any help finding a doctor, please feel free to reach out to me at my office.

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