

Mache Seibel, MD

# Changes During THE CHANGE



WHAT TO EXPECT AND  
WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

Menopause  
**Breakthrough™**

**M**enopause is a natural part of aging. Yet most women are taken aback by the range and severity of symptoms.

*My brain is so foggy I can't remember where I parked the car.*

*I keep waking up hot, cold, and then sweaty and never feel rested. I even wake up tired.*

*I look in the mirror and can't believe it's me. Where did all those wrinkles come from?*

If any of this sounds familiar, or you're having other symptoms and you're wondering if they are due to menopause, keep on reading. About 6000 women enter menopause every day and millions more are in the ten-year window around menopause. During my nearly 20 years at Harvard where I ran the Division of Reproductive Endocrinology at Harvard's Beth Israel Hospital, and more recently as Director of the Complicated Menopause Program at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, I've had the opportunity

to talk with and treat thousands of women for their menopause issues. Many of my patients came in feeling frustrated and confused. And no wonder – friends, books, talk shows and doctors offer often wildly different advice about what to do for menopausal symptoms.

But I found that when I helped women understand the issues they were facing, it helped them gain clarity over the contradictions, misunderstandings and negative press out there about menopause. I want to help you become more confident about where you are in this transition, more aware of what is possible to achieve, and more certain about how to achieve it. This e-book will get you started on your journey. It is an introduction to changes during the change. And later on if you want to delve even deeper, I will suggest additional tools and resources to help you go further.

## ***Menopause Is The New Normal***

You've lived through changes all of your life; childhood, puberty, young adulthood and possibly pregnancy. Menopause is just one more change. It's a normal stage of life, a passage to a new beginning. I remember a conversation my wife had with her father after the birth

of our first baby. “I can’t wait for things to get back to normal.” Her father, a pediatrician, smiled and said, “This is your *new* normal.” At the time we didn’t realize just how profound his statement was. And how true it is for all the different stages of life. Menopause is another phase that creates a “new normal.” Although most symptoms gradually lessen, it is definitely different from the past. The more you understand what to expect during this time, the better you’ll be able to take good care of yourself.

## ***So What Is Menopause?***

### ***It’s very much like puberty – only backwards.***

Puberty marks the beginning of fertility; menopause marks the end of fertility. In puberty you go from having no periods to irregular periods, to regular periods. Menopause is the transition from having regular periods to irregular periods to not having periods. Reproductive hormones stop their naturally balanced going up and down each month to prepare for a possible pregnancy, to becoming irregular and out of balance. That causes periods to become irregular. Over time, estrogen levels drop to prepuberty levels, periods stop and it is no longer possible to get pregnant naturally.

The definition of natural menopause is one year after the last period and like in puberty, these changing hormone levels around menopause can make you feel out of sorts, foggy, irritable and sleepy. So there may be a lot going on that seems unfamiliar. For some women symptoms are very mild and for others they can be more extreme. Occasionally the symptoms can cause you to wonder if there is a medical or emotional problem.

The most important thing you should remember is that menopause is a time of change. Acknowledge these changes and share them with your healthcare provider so you can receive help when needed. Also realize that you are not alone in this journey; two million of your sisters enter menopause every year.

## ***When Does Menopause Happen?***

Menopause doesn’t happen by a schedule; it can happen earlier or later. Although menopause can occasionally occur before age 40, a condition called premature menopause, the mean age of natural or spontaneous menopause in the United States is age 51 and the range is between age 40 and 55 years.

old. And just like puberty, it doesn't happen in a day. The transition into menopause, called *perimenopause*, can take as long as 10 years. That means you may begin to notice mild changes up to a decade before menopause! If you go through menopause at 51, you could have subtle symptoms from age 41. If you go through menopause at age 40, you might note changes from age 30. That's why it's so important to realize this time frame and be tuned in to your body.

If your ovaries are removed surgically, that is called surgical menopause no matter how old you are. When this happens, menopause occurs abruptly and the abruptness often causes symptoms to be more intense. Taking out your uterus and leaving in your ovaries stops your period but it is not menopause.

## ***Changes During the Change***

When you go through menopause, you'll have to make a decision of whether to live with your symptoms or try to bring your hormones back into balance by taking hormone replacement therapy (HRT). What you decide may determine how much your symptoms bother you, so it's important to learn about the risks and benefits of taking HRT or

other types of treatments. Below I'm going to talk about some of the more common symptoms of menopause. Fortunately, most women do not experience all of them. Knowing what is possible will help you tune in to any changes you are having so you won't be caught off guard.

### **1 Who turned up the heat?**

Hot flashes (sometimes called hot flushes) are a common complaint. Up to 85% of women experience some feelings of warmth. For some women this is a mild experience and not very bothersome. Other women have very intense feelings of flushing, sweating and heat that interfere with everything. One of the challenges is that they are hard to predict, although some women recognize personal triggers that may include spicy foods, alcohol, caffeine and chocolate. No one knows exactly what causes hot flashes but we do know the thermostat that regulates body temperature is not working perfectly. Blood vessels suddenly dilate and give off heat. The body senses the heat and quickly cools down which can lead to chills. Hot flashes tend to be most intense during the one to three years leading up to menopause and in women who have had a surgical menopause. There are many treatments avail-

able that include hormones, prescription non-hormones, alternative treatments and lifestyle changes that I won't have room to discuss now, so talk with your doctor about which would work best for you.

## **2 Riding the Mood Roller Coaster**

**2** Emotional changes are also very common. In the past you might have felt anxious or a bit sad from time to time, but now your emotions are more intense and unpredictable. That is caused by the unbalanced hormones that fluctuate wildly up and down causing feelings to go up and down with them and feel stronger or last longer.

Women who have a known psychological condition may find that their fluctuating hormones and lower estrogen levels in and around menopause may affect their symptoms and treatment that has worked well for a while might be less effective. Treating the symptoms of menopause is very helpful in controlling your mood, so coordinate working with both your menopause expert and mental health expert to get the best results.

## **3 Whacky Periods**

**3** Menstrual cycles changes are extremely common in peri-

menopause and beyond. More than 70% of women will have irregular menstrual cycles in their 40s. You may have longer or shorter cycles, heavier or lighter cycles, increased bleeding or skipped bleeding. Within 1 – 3 years of menopause, cycles often become more ≥ 60 days apart.

## **4 My Heart Is Racing**

**4** Palpitations are rapid heart-beats, usually about 12 to 18 more beats per minute than you're used to. They are common just before a hot flash but can happen by themselves. Palpitations can be a sign of a heart problem, but they are usually just one of the many changes that occur naturally as a result of shifting hormone levels.

Lower estrogen levels can increase your risk for cardiovascular disease. This is a larger discussion that I will be addressing in an upcoming book and a webinar, but I wanted to at least mention it here.

## **5 I Am So Tired**

**5** Menopause can wreak havoc on your sleep. According to the National Sleep Foundation, approximately 61% of menopausal women have sleep problems. Sleeping difficulties can lead to other problems, such as daytime drowsiness.

Here are some of the reasons why

- Waking up at night to go to the bathroom
- Low estrogen lowers REM sleep which lowers sleep quality
- Hot flashes can disturb sleep
- Restless leg

If you are having a sleep problem, either falling asleep or waking up early, talk with your doctor to see what can be done.

## *Other Changes During The Change*

In addition to the 5 changes mentioned above, some women experience dry eyes, thinning of hair, skin changes, vaginal dryness, weight gain, bladder issues, bone loss, and lower libido. Thinking about all of this can be scary and can leave you wondering what you can do to take care of yourself. Some women breeze through and others find it hard to function. By reading this e-book you have already taken the first step to better health during menopause. I mentioned above that later on I would offer you some tools and resources if you wanted to delve deeper into Changes During the Change. First I want to give 5 Action Steps to get you started. And if you would like to go deeper

into this subject, you can click on the link below to watch my **FREE webinar** called ***Navigating “The Change.”*** I created it specifically to help you get more breakthrough information.

Because living a healthy lifestyle is important for any menopause symptoms you may be having, here are **5 Action Steps** to get you started:

**1 Eat the right foods:** Just by changing your diet to include more veggies, some fruit (especially berries) and no sodas or processed food will do amazing things for your body. Include healthy fats like olive oil and avocado in moderation. Limit the amount of sugar and bread and you're on your way. Feeling thirsty? Drink water.

**2 Get enough sleep:** Start a bedtime routine that includes a set bedtime, time to unwind, no TV or the computer before bed, a cool, dark bedroom, and no alcohol or caffeine at least four hours prior to bedtime. Too little sleep increases your risk for obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes and heart disease. Too little sleep also changes the hormones that control appetite: you don't get full and you feel hungrier.

**3 Lower your stress:** This is important throughout life, and especially during menopause when so much is going on in your body. Set aside 15 to 30 minutes a day for You Time. Take a relaxing bath, listen to relaxing music, meditate, or do an activity that calms you. When you feel stressed do you find yourself reaching for something to eat? Don't chips and chocolate seem particularly good choices? Unfortunately they are not. Emotional eating is a major contributor to weight gain. Lower your stress and you will lower automatically lower your need to nibble, sleep better and feel happier.

**4 Exercise:** It burns calories, improves your appearance and builds muscles. Muscles burn 3 times more calories than fat. Remember, dancing, gardening and walking are all great ways to exercise. How much exercise? The goal is to cause your heart to beat at 60 to 75% of its maximum capacity to assure maximum cardiovascular benefit without overtaxing your heart. The desired heart rate changes with aging and health. Always discuss what is an ideal heart

rate for you with your doctor. As a simple estimate, subtract your age from 220 and multiply that times 0.65. Exercise will also help control stress and improve sleep as long as you don't do it near bedtime.

**5 Socialize:** Studies show that socialization is one of the most important parts of living a long and happy life. Socializing can take many forms: going to religious services, volunteering, taking a class, attending an activity, calling a girlfriend and going for coffee or shopping and so many more. As a simple way to start, think of someone you care about and haven't spoken to in a while and give her a call. If you do that every week, you'll soon have your own social network.

**Remember: Click Here to sign up for my FREE Navigating the Change Webinar to help you break through your menopause symptoms.**