

HEALTHY MENOPAUSE



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ص.ب. ٢٢٢٧٦٦، العين الإمارات العربية المتحدة
ت: ٨٠٠ ٢٠٠٠
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Genitourinary symptoms of menopause (due to low estrogen)

- **Vaginal dryness:**
Discomfort during intercourse or daily activities
- **Urinary incontinence:**
Pelvic floor muscles can weaken during menopause, leading to urinary leakage
- **Urinary tract infections (UTIs):**
Changes in the urinary tract environment, makes it more susceptible to infection
- **Painful sex:**
Vaginal dryness and thinning of the vaginal lining causes discomfort during sexual intercourse
- **Genital itching or burning**
- **Reduced sexual desire**

These symptoms can significantly affect a woman's quality of life during menopause, but can be managed with HRT, vaginal moisturisers or lubricants, pelvic floor exercises and medications for urinary incontinence, and vaginal estrogen gels.

Are there any risks with HRT?

Earlier when HRT was only available as pills, studies stated that although HRT has been found effective in reducing the symptoms of menopause, it also carries certain risks such as increasing the risk of breast cancer, stroke, heart disease and blood clots.



What is menopause?

Menopause is the natural biological process that occurs in women usually in their late 40s to mid-50s, wherein the menstrual cycle stops, and the hormone levels decrease. This can lead to a range of symptoms such as hot flashes, night sweats, vaginal dryness, sleep disturbances, mood changes, muscle and joint pains and more. If symptoms start before 40 years it is called premature ovarian insufficiency.

What is HRT?

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is a treatment that aims to alleviate the symptoms associated with menopause by supplementing the hormones that are declining in the body, primarily estrogen and progesterone and testosterone if needed. HRT is available in various forms like pills, patches, gels, and creams.

What is estrogen and its benefits?

Estrogen is a hormone produced predominantly by the ovaries and small amounts from adrenal glands. It helps with regulation of menstrual cycle and the development of female characteristics.

Estrogen receptors are present in cells throughout our entire body, so when levels fluctuate and fall, this can trigger wide-ranging and varying symptoms including low mood, anxiety, memory problems, poor sleep, joint aches and pains, brain fog, hot flushes and vaginal dryness. It also plays important roles in bone health (prevents osteoporosis), memory and cognition and cardiovascular health and is essential for many bodily functions, including:

- Temperature regulation
- Maintaining healthy and strong muscles and joints
- Helping your nerves work correctly
- Maintaining a healthy metabolism
- Improving the way your immune cells work and function
- Reducing inflammation throughout your body
- Improving the way other neurotransmitters (such as serotonin) work in your brain
- Keeping the lining of your vagina and vulval tissues healthy and lubricated

Before starting hormone replacement therapy (HRT)

It is essential to undergo a thorough medical evaluation to assess your overall health and any potential risks. This evaluation includes but not limited to:

- Medical history and physical exam including any chronic conditions and medications
- Base line blood tests
- Mammogram
- Pap test
- Bone Densitometry
- Psychological evaluation
- Education and informed consent

Management

• Life Style modification

- Balanced diet
- Exercise
- Weight management
- Smoking cessation
- Stress management
- Medications

• Estrogen

The dose of estrogen needed to relieve the symptoms of the perimenopause and menopause can really vary between people. Some women need higher doses than other women to achieve the same benefits, especially as estrogen can often be absorbed differently through the skin. Some people absorb estrogen much more effectively through gels rather than patches.

Studies have shown that younger women experiencing symptoms of the perimenopause or menopause often tend to need higher levels of estradiol (and therefore usually higher doses of HRT) than older women do.

Patches are used twice a week and if gels – applied daily.

Side effects:

Mild breast tenderness



Newer forms of HRT with body identical hormones have shown to reduce these risks as they have the same molecular shape as the hormones our body naturally produces.

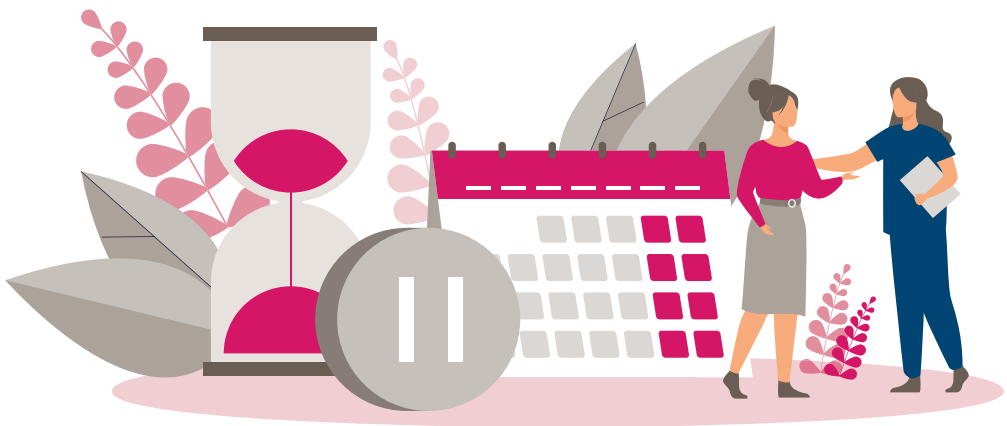
Transdermal estrogen, which is applied to the skin in the form of patches, gels, or creams, is considered to have a lower risk of blood clots compared to oral hormone replacement therapy (HRT). The reason for this is that oral estrogen goes through the liver, which increases the production of clotting factors in the blood, while the transdermal route bypasses the liver and delivers a more controlled amount of estrogen.

However, women who have additional risk factors such as smoking, obesity, hypertension, or a personal or family history of blood clots should modify their life style and work towards a healthy life that can be promoted by HRT.

Are hormone tests required to diagnose menopause?

Hormone blood tests are not usually needed to make a diagnosis of the perimenopause or menopause, as they are unreliable especially as the levels fluctuate so much during the perimenopause. However, hormone blood tests can be useful for:

- Some women to monitor the absorption of hormones from HRT
- Symptomatic young women less than 40 years of age (POI)



Appropriate healthy food for menopause

- **Foods rich in calcium:**

Menopause increases the risk of osteoporosis. Therefore, it is important to consume calcium-rich foods such as low fat dairy products, green leafy vegetables, fortified plant-based milk, and calcium-fortified foods.

- **Food rich in Vitamin D:**

Vitamin D foods such as oily fish (salmon, mackerel), fortified or plant-based milk, and egg yolks, and get sun exposure (with proper protection).

- **Full grain:**

Choose whole grains such as brown rice, quinoa, wholegrain bread, and oats.

- **Healthy fats:**

Include healthy fat sources like avocados, nuts, seeds, and olive oil.

- **Fruits and vegetables:**

Many fruits and vegetables are rich in antioxidants vegetables such as dark green leafy vegetables, spinach, kale and broccoli, as well as bell peppers, eggplant, tomatoes and carrots, fruits such as mango, cherries and berries.

- **Lean protein:**

Include lean protein sources such as chicken, fish, tofu, legumes, and beans.

Stay well hydrated by drinking plenty of water, herbal teas, and other decaffeinated beverages. Avoid or limit caffeine and alcohol.

Purpose of healthy food

Vitamin D helps calcium absorption and supports bone health.

Whole grains provide fibre, vitamins, and minerals and help with weight management and blood sugar control.

Healthy fats support hormone production and provide important nutrients.

Fruits and vegetables rich in antioxidants, vitamins, minerals, and fibre support overall health and reduce the risk of chronic diseases.

Protein supports muscle health and helps maintain a healthy weight.

- **Progesterone**

In women with a uterus (womb), taking estrogen can cause the lining (endometrium) to thicken. To prevent this thickening, it is required to take either body identical progesterone or have the Mirena coil.

- If menstruating the dose is 200mg Utrogestan every evening for two out of four weeks
- Once periods have stopped, the dose of Utrogestan is usually 100mg every evening
- Mirena coil can stay in for five years

Side effects:

- Mild sedative effect, so good to use at night
- Bleeding commonly occurs in the first three to six months after starting or altering the dose of HRT and needs to be investigated if it occurs beyond six months

- **Testosterone**

Testosterone is considered if there is reduced libido, low energy, reduced motivation and brain fogging despite adequate estrogen replacement and after determining the testosterone level, sex hormone binding globulin (SHBG) and free androgen index (FAI).

If therapy is started (available as 5mg of cream / gel and used daily), periodic monitoring required to keep levels in the female range.

Side effects:

Mild hair growth at the site of application

How does nutrition affect menopause?

Adopting a healthy lifestyle and nutritional habits is essential because they concern all women, can be modified, and impact both longevity and quality of life by improving body composition, bone mass, and risk markers for cardiovascular disease.

Following low-fat, plant-based diets with sufficient intake of protein and fruits and vegetables that are high in antioxidants is associated with beneficial effects on body composition by decreasing body fat, preserving lean mass index, increasing muscle performance, and decreasing oxidative stress and inflammation to improve quality of life, management of mood/ anxiety symptoms, and prevent or decrease complications.

What are the mental symptoms of perimenopause/menopause?

During perimenopause, some women feel that they experience cognitive changes, which may include symptoms such as forgetfulness, slower thinking, confusion and difficulty concentrating.

Menopausal symptoms may include:

- Anger and irritability
- Anxiety
- Forgetfulness
- Loss of self-esteem
- Loss of confidence
- Low mood and feelings of sadness or depression
- Poor concentration

How can i cope with the emotional changes of menopause?

- Exercise and eat healthily
- Find a self-calming skill to practice, such as yoga
- Meditation or rhythmic breathing
- Avoid tranquilizers and alcohol
- Engage in a creative outlet that fosters a sense of achievement
- Stay connected with your family and community

What psychiatric drugs and psychological interventions help with menopause?

The most well investigated group of non-hormonal agents are the serotonergic antidepressants such as escitalopram, paroxetine, sertraline and fluoxetine (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs)), and desvenlafaxine and venlafaxine (selective noradrenergic reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs)).

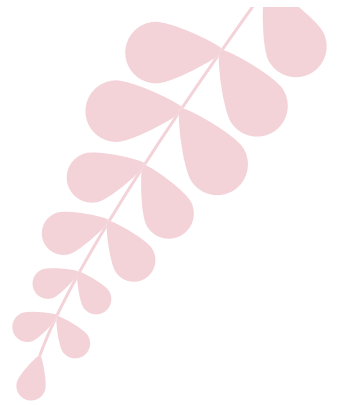
CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy) is a structured, short-term and skills-focused psychotherapy and it is a combination of cognitive and behavioural therapies. The main approach in this treatment gives priority to the role of thoughts, beliefs, maladaptive perceptions, and cognitions to attain compatible thoughts and behaviours.

The intervention sessions also provided psychoeducation about menopause and hot flashes, stress management, problem-solving, cognitive and behavioral strategies to help manage hot flashes, relaxation techniques, breathing techniques, as well as identification and control of excessive worries and irrational beliefs.

What to include in your plate?

“The shape of the food makes a difference”

- **Meat suggestions for you**
 - Scrambled egg toasts
 - Chicken shawarma with potatoes
 - Greek salmon salad
- **Snack suggestions:**
 - Berry smoothie
 - Popcorn and 3 pieces of dates
 - Chia seed pudding



Sports suggestions to refresh your soul

- **Walking:**

Walking is a low-impact exercise that can be easily incorporated into daily routines. It helps improve cardiovascular health, maintain bone density, and manage weight.
- **Cycling:**

Whether indoors on a stationary bike or outdoors on a bicycle, cycling is a great aerobic activity that strengthens the lower body muscles and provides cardiovascular benefits.
- **Swimming:**

Swimming and water aerobics are gentle on the joints and offer a full-body workout. They help improve cardiovascular fitness, muscle tone, and flexibility.
- **Yoga:**

Yoga combines physical postures, breathing exercises, and meditation. It can help reduce stress, improve flexibility, balance, and overall well-being.
- **Dancing:**

Dancing is a fun way to stay active and boost mood.
- **Tennis:**

This racket sport offers cardiovascular exercise.
- **Strength training:**

Incorporating strength training using resistance bands, weights, or bodyweight exercises can help maintain muscle mass.

- **Changing your routine**

Going for a walk during a work break and noticing the things you see and hear. Over time, you will come to realise that the worrying thought, or fear is just that, a thought.

- **Exercise**

Exercise releases endorphins which are the body's natural sedative, which help us calm down and approach situations with greater clarity.

- **Get more sleep**

Stress can make sleep difficult and yet it is the very thing our body needs in order to process information and help us make sense of stressful situations. Ways to induce sleep include taking a warm bath, listening to relaxing music and writing down a list of all the things that are on your mind before taking to your bed to avoid them taking over your subconscious thoughts.

- **Get talking**

A problem shared is a problem halved, but more than that, talking to other people often helps us develop an alternative viewpoint that is difficult to acknowledge when we're under stress. Friends and family are often only too happy to listen as it helps them feel more connected to you during times when you need support. Or if the problem involves those closest to you, talking to people not involved, such as work colleagues, can also help. The main thing is that you talk to someone you can trust rather than keep it all bottled up inside.

- **Take control**

During stressful times it is easy to internalise things and over-think about the situation we're in. Taking control of what we're facing breaks it down into manageable chunks. We can then develop action plans and coping strategies to deal with each piece of the jigsaw, which makes even the most insurmountable stressful situations easier to tackle head-on.

- **Get positive**

Thinking about happy memories or times when you have been successful is a great way of reducing stress. Visualisation techniques are often used by sportspeople to help them battle their nerves and compete with confidence, they're also a way of reminding us that difficult times do pass and that life is a tapestry of good and not-so-good times.

Which hormone causes anxiety in menopause?

As you enter the perimenopause, however, lower levels of estrogen mean that there is more cortisol to overwhelm your nervous system in the morning. This surge in cortisol explains why you may feel more anxious as soon as you wake up.

How to stop overthinking?

Here are six ways to stop overthinking everything:

- Notice when you're stuck in your head. Overthinking can become such a habit that you don't even recognise when you're doing it
- Keep the focus on problem-solving
- Challenge your thoughts
- Schedule time for reflection
- Learn mindfulness skills
- Change the channel

Self-help techniques to improve mental health

• Tap into mindfulness

In short, mindfulness is taking in each moment. This means paying attention to how you feel, and what is happening in the here and now. Sometimes we can be too concerned with tasks we need to get done, and with worries about the future. Mindfulness encourages you to focus on touch, sights, sounds, smells, and emotions that you are experiencing in the moment.

If you're feeling anxious, stressed or even lonely, being aware of the way you feel can help you identify why you feel a certain way in that moment. Tackling each feeling as it arises can also stop you becoming overwhelmed by ever increasing waves of emotions.

The more you practice mindfulness, the more you're likely to become aware of specific situations that make you feel a certain way. Mindfulness can also help to diffuse stress or anxiety by focusing your attention on things you can see, hear, touch, smell or feel. In addition to acknowledging feelings as they happen, make time each day to practice mindfulness by: Digesting what has happened during the day and writing any thoughts and feelings in a mindfulness diary. Putting thoughts on paper, which can help minimize concerns that might seem more worrying in your mind. Finding somewhere to relax and take deep breaths, focusing on each breath in, and out.