WOMEN'S HEALTH FACTSHEET

Perimenopause and Menopause

Understanding the transition, recognising changes and finding appropriate support

The short version

Perimenopause is the transition around menopause, when hormone levels fluctuate and periods often change. Menopause is reached after 12 months without a period when hormonal contraception is not affecting bleeding. The World Health Organization describes menopause as a life stage rather than a disease. Experiences vary: some people have few symptoms, while others find that symptoms significantly affect daily life.

What do the terms mean?

Perimenopause	The transition before menopause. Periods may become irregular, heavier or lighter, and symptoms can begin while periods are still happening.
Menopause	The point reached after 12 consecutive months without a period, provided hormonal contraception is not masking the menstrual pattern.
Postmenopause	The time after menopause. Some symptoms settle, while others - such as vaginal dryness or joint discomfort - may continue and can still be treated.

Common changes

Body

- Hot flushes or night sweats
- Headaches or migraine changes
- Muscle and joint aches
- Skin, hair or oral-health changes

Mind and sleep

- Sleep disruption and fatigue
- Low mood, anxiety or mood changes
- Memory or concentration difficulties
- Reduced confidence or feeling unlike yourself

Periods and intimate health

- Changes in menstrual timing or flow
- Vaginal dryness or discomfort
- Urinary symptoms or recurrent UTIs
- Changes in sexual desire

Symptoms can overlap with other health conditions. New, persistent or concerning symptoms should not automatically be assumed to be menopause.

How is it identified?

For otherwise healthy people aged 45 or over with menopause-associated symptoms, NICE recommends identifying perimenopause or menopause from symptoms and menstrual changes rather than routine laboratory testing. Blood tests may be considered in some people aged 40 to 45, or under 40 when menopause is suspected. Hormonal contraception, hysterectomy and some medical treatments can make identification less straightforward.

Seek medical advice promptly if

you have bleeding after 12 months without a period; very heavy or unusual bleeding; symptoms before age 45; persistent palpitations; symptoms that are severe or affecting daily life; or any change that worries you. Postmenopausal bleeding should always be checked, even if it happens only once or is a small amount.

What support is available?

There is no single best approach for everyone. Options should be discussed in relation to symptoms, medical history, personal preferences and individual risks.

Clinical options	Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) can help many menopause symptoms. Different types and routes are available. A qualified prescriber should discuss individual benefits, risks and follow-up. Other prescribed or non-hormonal options may also be appropriate.
CBT and emotional support	Menopause-specific cognitive behavioural therapy may help with hot flushes, sleep difficulties, low mood or anxiety. Supportive conversations and psychological care can also be valuable.
Vaginal and urinary symptoms	Lubricants, moisturisers and prescribed vaginal oestrogen may help, depending on individual circumstances. Recurrent urinary symptoms or pain should be assessed rather than self-diagnosed.
Everyday wellbeing	Regular sleep routines, balanced nutrition, movement adapted to ability, resistance or weight-bearing activity, stopping smoking, reducing alcohol and stress support can benefit current wellbeing and long-term bone and heart health.

Preparing for an appointment

- Record symptoms, menstrual changes and how they affect sleep, work, relationships or daily activities.
- List current medicines, contraception, supplements and relevant medical or family history.
- Write down the questions that matter most to you, including benefits, risks and alternatives.
- Ask when treatment or symptoms should be reviewed and what changes need earlier medical attention.

Remember that HRT is not contraception. Ask a qualified healthcare professional what contraception is appropriate during perimenopause and when it can safely be stopped.

How Health Matters UK can support you

Health Matters UK provides health education and personalised wellbeing support. We can help you organise your concerns, explore realistic lifestyle steps, prepare questions for a healthcare appointment and find appropriate trusted services. We do not diagnose menopause, prescribe treatment or replace a GP, pharmacist, menopause specialist or other regulated healthcare professional.

A useful next step

If symptoms are affecting your life, consider completing a symptom record and arranging an appointment with your GP or another appropriately qualified healthcare professional. If you would like help making sense of your wellbeing priorities, Health Matters UK can offer a supportive wellbeing conversation.

Women's health matters to us

Every woman deserves clear, compassionate and evidence-informed information that recognises her individual experiences, circumstances and stage of life. Our aim is to help people feel heard, understand their options and take realistic next steps without judgement.

Important information

This factsheet is for general education and does not replace personalised medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Do not start, stop or change prescribed medication without speaking to an appropriately qualified healthcare professional. For urgent medical help, use NHS 111; call 999 in an emergency.

Evidence and review

Prepared in line with Health Matters UK's Evidence & Editorial Standards. The principal sources used were current NHS menopause information, NICE guideline NG23, World Health Organization information and British Menopause Society/Women's Health Concern resources. External guidance remains the responsibility of the issuing organisation.

• NHS. What are menopause and perimenopause? nhs.uk/conditions/menopause-and-perimenopause/

• NHS. Symptoms, treatment and things you can do for menopause and perimenopause. nhs.uk/conditions/menopause-and-perimenopause/

• NICE. Menopause: identification and management (NG23), updated 2026. nice.org.uk/guidance/ng23

• World Health Organization. Menopause fact sheet, 2024. who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/menopause

• British Menopause Society. Menopause: identification and management - from NICE guideline to practice, 2026. thebms.org.uk/publications/nice-guideline/

• Women's Health Concern. Menopause factsheets and resources. womens-health-concern.org/help-and-advice/factsheets/

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