When Does Menopause Start, and How Long Does It Last?

by AFRA WILLMORE

How Long Does Menopause Last? – Coping With a Longer Than Average Menopause

When I was experiencing erratic menstruation in my late 30s and suffered a miscarriage in my early 40s, I was shocked to be told that blood tests had revealed I was menopausal.

I was shocked as it hadn't occurred to me that menopause could be in my immediate future. I thought I was too young. I hadn't experienced any hot flashes or any of the other symptoms I thought were inevitable with what my Granny used to call "the change."

In fact, I should have listened more to my granny talking about this kind of thing with my mum. They mostly spoke about "women's problems," but their conversations (it turned out) were mostly about their early menopause experiences.

You Can Experience Menopause Earlier

Did you know that statistically if your mother had an early menopause (also known as premature), you are more likely to become menopausal earlier too?

It's most definitely worth talking to female family members to establish when they first started having symptoms of menopause, especially if you haven't yet started or completed your family.

The Research

A Dutch survey published in 2001 in the journal Human Reproduction revealed that genetics almost certainly governs the timing of your menopause.

The study followed 243 non-twin sisters in 118 families along with 22 non-identical twin sisters and 37 identical twin sisters.

For non-twin sisters, the age at which they reached the menopause was 85 to 87 percent down to genetic factors. For twins, the figure was 70 to 71 percent. Although lower, researchers say the difference is not statistically significant.

Fertility and Menopause

Dr. Jan-Peter de Bruin, from the department of obstetrics and gynecology at the University Medical Centre in Utrecht, said: "The increasing age at which women become pregnant with their first child is one of the most remarkable demographic changes in the last 30 to 40 years.

"More and more women will face involuntary childlessness if this trend keeps going. A woman with one or more

first-degree relatives with a history of early menopause is liable to experience earlier menopause herself.

"Further, this same woman is also expected to start becoming less fertile and to be completely infertile at an earlier age, thus being at greatly increased risk of remaining childless if she delays childbearing."

A woman's store of eggs declines throughout her life. When stores are exhausted, it triggers the menopause.

Dr. de Bruin said, "If our hypothesis is correct, then it would be sensible for a woman to make herself aware of the age at which her female relatives have reached menopause. If she wants a family, it could help her to decide whether it is wise to postpone motherhood too long."

Menopause Should Not Delay Having a Family

The doctor added that women whose family members experienced a later start to menopause should not delay having a family, partly because menopausal ages among family members can still vary widely. Fertility declines rapidly after the age of 30 and the risk of miscarriage and health issues in both mum and baby increase after the age of 30.

I thought (erroneously) that because I had spent a large part of my adult life pregnant carrying my seven children, that my menopause would be later than usual.

So, I was basing my assumption on the fact that menopause marks the point your body’s store of eggs runs out. I figured simplistically that while I was pregnant my body was saving the eggs, it would have lost during menstruation. I was wrong!

A "Perimenopause Baby"

My doctor told me that the child I had aged 40 was almost certainly a “perimenopause baby,” where my hormones had stabilized long enough for me to get pregnant and maintain a pregnancy. My menopausal hormones almost certainly doomed the miscarriage I suffered two years later.

I told my doctor of how after years of being a 28-day cycle, light-flow girl, I suddenly had a stupidly heavy flow at irregular periods (excuse the pun!), and she decided I had probably started to be to be perimenopausal in my 30s.

After my miscarriage, we had been actively trying to conceive and getting more and more desperate as months passed without success. I found myself buying industrial quantities of internet cheapie pregnancy tests.

I was delighted to discover some tiny amounts of the pregnancy hormone HCG (Human Chorionic Gonadotropin) for a bargain price.

What I didn’t know was that women transitioning into menopause might have slightly raised levels of HGC which can trigger a false positive on a sensitive pregnancy test.

I was devasted when my doctor explained this to me. She carried out blood tests checking my levels of follicle stimulating hormone and estrogen and confirmed I was peri-menopausal.

It might seem pointless to have tests to determine something you can’t change, especially if you aren’t planning a new addition to the family but any change in menstruation should be investigated to rule out ovarian failure, thyroid issues, and other health conditions.

I'm Officially Menopausal

I’m 48 now and still suffering a few symptoms like the odd hot flash, but after over a year without a period I am officially out on the other side and can now describe myself as menopausal.

Next page: Read more to learn the answer to your question, "How long does menopause last?" Tips for coping with a longer than 'normal' menopause and more.

The Start of Menopause Is Called Perimenopause

Perimenopause is what I thought was menopause – it's that time when your periods become erratic or longer or heavier or shorter or spottier. Menopause is the end of your period and is official 12 months after your last period.

During perimenopause, you might start to experience hot flashes, mood changes, skin problems, loss of libido, vaginal dryness, fatigue, insomnia, depression and all the other delights caused by diminishing estrogen.

Menopause is the stage when all menstruation has ceased for at least 12 months.

As an aside, I had a small bleed after two years without any menstruation. I made an appointment with my doctor as any bleeding after a year of being period-free should be investigated.

My doctor sent me to the hospital for a (painless) sonograph scan, and luckily nothing sinister was found. My scary bleed was just a stray period, but it meant I had to start counting for another 12 months before I could once more assume I was in full menopause.

When I was young and trying to ignore the conversations my older female relatives were having, as well as assuming it was something that happened to old women, I never gave a second's thought to the question, "How long does menopause last?"

What's a 'Normal' Timeframe?

Some women are lucky and experience symptoms for only a few months, while most endure between one and five years. But some unfortunate women experience ongoing menopause symptoms well into their 60s.

So what is a "normal" menopause? Well, it's incredibly difficult to define since some doctors will quote a start in the over 40s with symptoms lasting two years as the norm, while others think early 50s and five years is normal. It's not uncommon to hear that more and more doctors believe it's normal to start in your 30s.

Apparently, most women are completely through menopause and are infertile by the age of 55.

The Stages of Menopause

A recent study carried out by US researchers found that some women experienced vasomotor symptoms (VMS) including hot flashes and night sweats for more than a decade. The study followed over 1,000 women, who were aged between 42 and 52 at the start of the study, for more than 17 years.

The average length of symptoms proved to be just over seven years for more than half of the women – slightly above the previously held belief that the average is five years – and African-American women proved more likely to experience symptoms for more than ten years.

Most women experienced symptoms for 4.5 years after their last menstrual period.

What's a 'Normal' Timeframe?

I have to say that among my group of friends I have not met a single person that fits any "normal" pattern. We have all had highly individual experiences, and responses to treatment so don't feel anxious if you have been experiencing menopausal symptoms for years, and the darn thing shows no signs of abating.

It may help to talk about your experience. If you are too embarrassed to discuss it with friends or relatives, you could turn to online chat rooms and message boards where you are bound to find someone else experiencing similar symptoms along with a similar time frame to you. Just “talking” about it to new online friends may help you feel less anxious and alone.

Coping With Ongoing Symptoms

Concentrate your efforts on finding what works for easing the symptoms that bother you most to make the experience less intrusive into your life.

Consider Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT)

Nobody will give you a medal for enduring years of discomfort and misery. There are lots of myths surrounding hormone replacement therapy, so make an appointment to discuss your options with your doctor.

Even if you have tried (and failed) previously with HRT, it’s worth checking if there might be another combination of estrogen or progesterone or both together which helps, or maybe think about exploring how the hormones are delivered into your system. You can get it in tablet form, patches, implants or in a topical form.

Make sure you stay in contact with your healthcare team and don’t panic if the first few times you discontinue medication your symptoms return.

In the end, I had forgotten to renew my repeat prescription, and it was when I ran out of tablets that I found my symptoms had dwindled to the point I could cope without them.

I did return to my doctor when I found that the most troublesome symptoms were affecting my love life with my husband and she recommended a topical approach, offering estrogen hormone pessaries which reduced vaginal dryness and other issues.

Natural Solutions for Menopause Symptoms

Still not for you? There are a few natural solutions for a couple of the more common menopause issues.

Hot flashes? Carry a hand-held fan and wear layers of natural fibers that you can peel off when things get sweaty. Anticipate flashpoints (excuse the pun!) and if you know you are likely to get hot under the collar at a wedding or recital, makes sure you got prepared with cool layers and sat near an exit or window in case things get too hot to handle.

Is insomnia your problem? Avoid using a smartphone, tablet, laptop or television screens in bed or even just before bedtime. Research shows the artificial light from these screens can trick your body into thinking it’s daytime. And ensure you get regular exercise. Go for a daily walk or build more exercise into your daily routine. Be careful not to become exhausted though – this in itself can cause sleep issues.

Or maybe you are fed up with years of teenage-style acne or other skin problems. Treat yourself to some new makeup and skincare products more suitable for your “new” skin.

We've All Heard These Menopause Myths Before

Positive thinking can help too. Remind yourself that this is a natural part of every woman’s life cycle and try not to dwell too much on the negative aspects or minor symptoms.

It might help to avoid thinking, “What is wrong with me,” and focusing on the plus sides like being able to wear white trousers whenever you want once you are in the menopause stage!

Having said all that if symptoms are making you miserable, stressed or depressed – seek help!