

Perimenopausal Symptoms & Possible Use of Hormones to Diminish Them

Remember puberty? Whether you realized it or not, your body was in a constant state of flux and may not have known what transformations were around the corner. Well, when a woman reaches her mid-30s, another “change” is in the offing. No, not menopause – *perimenopause*.

Perimenopause is defined as the “pre” menopausal state a woman’s body goes through and one that produces a variety of hormonal imbalances and fluctuations. It’s only recently that perimenopause has been recognized as quite a different condition from menopause. Women were usually given antidepressants and sent home without any real answers about what was plaguing them.

What’s been so confusing about perimenopause is that its symptoms mirror menopause so closely. Irregular periods, hair loss, heavy bleeding, sleep disruption, dry eyes, vaginal changes, hot flashes, weight gain, headaches, low sex drive or extreme emotional distress are all hallmarks of perimenopause – not much different from menopause! These symptoms are a direct result of your hormones being in a state of flux. They’re actually your body’s way of telling you something is wrong.

Perimenopause can start a whole 10–15 years before you stop having your period. In fact, women in their late 30s, 40s and early 50s may go in and out of perimenopause numerous times before actual menopause sets in, and that’s defined as 12 consecutive months without a period.

Role of Hormones in Perimenopause

Hormones control everything from our sex drive to our state of mind. When a woman’s three main hormones (i.e., estrogen, progesterone and testosterone) go out of balance, it throws off your entire equilibrium. For example, many women have an overload of estrogen due to diets high in carbs and low in protein and fats. Other factors that contribute to this state include

ongoing exposure to toxins, a lack of essential vitamins and nutrients, and that ever-present gremlin: mental and physical stress.

Estrogen and progesterone usually work in tandem when it comes to regulating the reproductive system. But for some perimenopausal women, progesterone may be low in comparison to estrogen. Other times, the progesterone level is normal, while estrogen is sky-high.

No two women's bodies will handle perimenopause the same way. Some will spend years in perimenopause while others may only have to deal with it for a few months. Just how much your symptoms impact you depends on your lifestyle. Poor diet, stress and an absence of regular daily exercise along with smoking and drinking will place limits on how well you do with your symptoms.

Hormone Replacement Therapy and Perimenopause

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) can provide an answer to the perimenopause problem. Once upon a time, hormone supplements were only available as pills. These days you can try pills, patches, gels, creams and even lozenges – whatever works best for your system.

Before you embark on a hormone therapy regimen, it's critical to understand what your baseline hormone levels are. Schedule a full physical exam with your doctor, who'll order a variety of tests to determine what your prescribed course of HRT should be. Here are a few clues as to what you can expect:

- ☑ Adding progestogen to estrogen is a common prescription, as it protects women who still have their uterus against endometrial cancer. If you still have your uterus and undergo estrogen therapy without progestogen, your risk of endometrial cancer goes up.

- ☑ Progestogen therapy can be administered two ways: either through ongoing therapy which combines estrogen-progestogen, or a continual-sequential estrogen-progestogen therapy.

- ☑ If you've undergone a hysterectomy, you probably don't need to add progestogen to your estrogen therapy. A locally applied low-dose of estrogen does not normally need the addition of progestogen. In general, it is best to stick with the lowest possible dose of estrogen to ease your perimenopause symptoms.

- ☑ Low-dose oral contraceptives may also be prescribed for the relief of perimenopause symptoms. Oral contraceptives not only quell the hot flashes associated with perimenopause, they also regulate the sometimes accompanying irregular bleeding. The use of oral contraceptives may be recommended instead of estrogen therapy, though every woman will react differently.

A good rule of thumb to follow with HRT is to choose the lowest effective dose possible for the shortest amount of time. Depending on your individual perimenopause symptoms, you may be on HRT anywhere from three to five years.

As your hormone levels rebalance, you may require fewer hormonal supplements, which will also require certain unwanted effects. There are a few tips you can implement to manage the transition off of HRT.

Plan ahead: Decreasing your dosages may not be smooth sailing, so have a plan in place for dealing with rebound symptoms. Consider lubricants for vaginal dryness, dressing in layers to deal with hot flashes and cutting back on caffeine.

Time is everything: Life has its own timetable and perimenopause is no exception. Perimenopause can seem like one more thing on an already crowded plate. However, once life settles down, you'll find yourself better equipped to deal with your symptoms. Additionally, the seasons can play an important role in when you decide to change your HRT dosages. For example if you start experiencing hot flashes, stopping in the summer isn't a good idea. Wait until winter.

Go slow: Don't try to quit HRT cold turkey; try to taper-off instead. Take a lower dose or administer them every other day. Whatever you decide, go slowly. A woman's hormones are constantly moving and any sudden changes to your HRT could put you back where you started. It's advisable to stay at the same levels for a minimum of three months. If your symptoms start to ramp up, continue with that same level for up to a year before attempting to lower it.

While perimenopause has been shrouded in mystery, it can be managed and you can find relief. Understanding what it is and how it affects your hormones is the best weapon against its difficult symptoms. Just remember: Perimenopause won't last forever!