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PERIMENOPAUSE

Perimenopause is a process — a gradual transition. No one test or sign is enough to determine if you've entered perimenopause. Your doctor takes many things into consideration, including your age, menstrual history, and what symptoms or body changes you're experiencing.

You may hear talk about checking hormone levels from friends or in social media, but other than checking thyroid function, which can affect hormone levels, hormone testing is rarely necessary or useful to evaluate perimenopause.

Medications are often used to treat perimenopausal symptoms.

- **Hormone therapy.** Systemic estrogen therapy — which comes in pill, skin patch, spray, gel or cream form — remains the most effective treatment option for relieving perimenopausal and menopausal hot flashes and night sweats. Depending on your personal and family medical history, your doctor may recommend estrogen in the lowest dose needed to provide symptom relief for you. If you still have your uterus, you'll need progestin in addition to estrogen. Systemic estrogen can help prevent bone loss.
- **Vaginal estrogen.** Estrogen can be administered directly to the vagina using a vaginal tablet, ring or cream. This treatment releases just a small amount of estrogen, which is absorbed by the vaginal tissue. It can help relieve vaginal dryness, discomfort with intercourse and some urinary symptoms.
- **Antidepressants.** Certain antidepressants related to the class of drugs called selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) may reduce menopausal hot flashes. An antidepressant for management of hot flashes may be useful for women who can't take estrogen for health reasons or for women who need an antidepressant for a mood disorder.
- **Gabapentin (Neurontin).** Gabapentin is approved to treat seizures, but it has also been shown to help reduce hot flashes. This drug is useful for women who can't use estrogen therapy for health reasons and for those who also have migraines.
- **Fezolinetant (Veozah).** This medicine is a hormone-free option for treating menopause hot flashes. It works by blocking a pathway in the brain that helps regulate body temperature.

Before deciding on any form of treatment, talk with your doctor about your options and the risks and benefits involved with each. Review your options yearly, as your needs and treatment options may change.

Lifestyle and home remedies

Making these healthy lifestyle choices may help ease some symptoms of perimenopause and promote good health as you age:

- **Ease vaginal discomfort.** Use over-the-counter, water-based vaginal lubricants (Astroglide, K-Y Liquid, others) or moisturizers (Replens, Vagisil Prohydrate, others). Choose products that don't contain glycerin, which can cause burning or irritation in women who are sensitive to that chemical. Staying sexually active also helps by increasing blood flow to the vagina. Also, coconut oil is a great option for vaginal lubrication.
- **Eat healthy.** Because your risk of osteoporosis and heart disease increases at this time, a healthy diet is more important than ever. Adopt a low-fat, high-fiber diet that's rich in fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Add calcium-rich foods. Avoid alcohol and caffeine if they seem to trigger hot flashes. Ask your doctor if you should also take a calcium supplement and if so, what type and how much — also ask if you need more vitamin D, which helps your body absorb calcium.
- **Be active.** Regular exercise and physical activity helps prevent weight gain, improves your sleep and elevates your mood. Try to exercise for 30 minutes or more on most days of the week, although not right before bedtime. Regular exercise has been shown to reduce hip fracture risk in older women and to strengthen bone density.

- **Get enough sleep.** Try to keep a consistent sleep schedule. Avoid caffeine, which can make it hard to get to sleep, and avoid drinking too much alcohol, which can interrupt sleep.
- **Practice stress-reduction techniques.** Practiced regularly, stress-reduction techniques, such as meditation or yoga, can promote relaxation and good health throughout your lifetime, but they may be particularly helpful during the menopausal transition.

Alternative medicine

In addition to conventional therapies, many women transitioning toward menopause want to know more about complementary and alternative approaches to treating symptoms. Researchers are looking into these therapies to determine their safety and effectiveness, but evidence is still often lacking.

Some of the options studied include:

- **Black cohosh.** This herb extract is used by some women to treat hot flashes and other menopausal symptoms. There's not enough evidence to support its use. Experts also are unsure of what risks taking black cohosh poses. Some studies have suggested that black cohosh was harmful to the liver, but other studies found no evidence that this is true. Researchers also question whether the herb extract is safe for women with or at risk of breast cancer.
- **Bioidentical hormones.** The term "bioidentical" implies that the hormones in the product are chemically identical to those your body produces. However, compounded bioidentical hormones AREN'T regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), so quality and risks could vary. There's also no evidence that compounded bioidentical hormones are safer or more effective than conventional hormone therapy.

Low-risk complementary therapies that may help reduce stress and improve psychological well-being include:

- **Acupuncture.** Research on acupuncture for decreasing hot flashes is inconclusive, but promising.
- **Relaxation techniques.** Yoga and meditation, for example, can help reduce stress, which may in turn help improve menopausal symptoms.

Talk with your doctor before taking any herbal or dietary supplements for perimenopausal or menopausal symptoms. The FDA does not regulate herbal products, and some can be dangerous or interact with other medications you take, putting your health at risk.

There is not one particular medication that is a "fix all" when it comes to perimenopausal symptoms. You may need to try different options to find what will work best for you. Please contact Women's Health for Life, Inc. to schedule an appointment to discuss what we can do to help you handle the symptoms you may be having.