

MENOPAUSE Rx.

“Prescription for Keeping on Track thru Menopause”

Here are some issues about menopause you will find useful.

MENOPAUSE Part 1

Menopause can be a rollercoaster ride for many women - up one day, down the next. You may find your children more annoying than usual or you might fall apart if your coffee's not prepared the right way. Television shows can seem particularly heart wrenching and co-workers especially frustrating. Sometimes the slightest thing will make you fly off the handle. Though you may feel out of control, you actually are experiencing one of the most common symptoms of menopause – **mood swings**.

Sad or Angry?

Mood swings have a certain knack for making you feel completely lost. Your emotions may be so out of whack that you may not even know whether you should be sad or angry in certain situations. Though you probably feel like you are completely off your rocker, more than 15% of women experience similar **emotional difficulties** during menopause. However, mood swings can be frustrating, not only for you, but for your family as well. Luckily, there are a number of effective ways to deal with mood swings, from botanical supplements to exercise and diet changes.

Mood swings are generally defined as rapidly changing moods. They are one of the most misunderstood menopause symptoms, with many doctors simply not recognising the extremes that menopausal women face on a daily basis. Women are often lambasted by their children or partner for feeling happy one minute and sad the next. In order to deal with them effectively, it is important to understand the cause of these mood swings and the factors that can make them worse.

Causes of Mood Swings

Mood swings during menopause are still a cause for great debate. No one is entirely sure what the exact cause of mood swings is but it is generally accepted that fluctuating hormones are responsible for these **emotional whirlwinds**. During menopause, your body no longer produces any eggs for fertilisation. As a result, your body stops producing hormones that trigger ovulation and menstruation. Gradually, your periods and ovulation will become more erratic, sending your hormones into an up and down spiral.

These constantly fluctuating levels of estrogen, progesterone, and androgens have a definite effect on your mental state. These hormones control **serotonin** levels in your brain, which is the chemical that manipulates mood. If your serotonin happens to drop, so will your mood; if it rises, your mood will go along with it. However, others believe that mood swings during menopause are due to the intense symptoms associated with early menopause.

You have possibly already experienced sweaty hot flushes, **insomnia**, and **extreme fatigue**. These symptoms can leave you **exhausted**, **cranky**, and **irritated** beyond belief. And the more tired you get, the more you find that all those little things bother you.

Menopausal symptoms can be very intense for some women, making life even more **stressful**. Menopause can coincide with retirement, kids leaving home, and other major life-changing events. It is no wonder that menopausal women have emotions that are all over the place.

Get Back into the Swing of Things

Mood swings don't have to rule menopause. There are a few simple things that you can do to help yourself feel more in control. The best thing that you can do when you feel intense emotion is to recognise that you may be having a mood swing. Just knowing that you are not crazy and that there is a reason for your emotions can help you feel much more in command of your body and life. Recognising situations of **stress** and finding a way to put them on hold for a while can also maximise your control.

Exercise and **diet** can also go a long way to curbing mood swings. Exercising 20 minutes a day, three times a week can help you to focus your energy and forget your emotions for a little while. It also helps restore broken **sleep** patterns, which lead to **anxiety**, **anger**, and **irritability**. Eating right can boost **serotonin** levels in your brain, helping you to feel more upbeat and energised. **Complex carbohydrates** found in peas, beans, and other foods help to raise serotonin levels, as does hot milk. Eating **small meals** and a number of **snacks** throughout the day can also give you the **energy** you need to deal with fluctuating emotions.

Some women find complementary therapies particularly helpful in fighting off mood swings. Natural remedies for menopause such as **yoga**, **meditation**, **massage** and **acupuncture** can provide **stress relief** and give you time for **personal reflection**. Some **herbal remedies** for menopause have been proven to help balance moods. Twenty minutes of **sun exposure** every day can also lighten your mood and your day.

When experiencing mood swings it can be very helpful to **speak with others**. Consult your **doctor** if your menopause treatment is ineffective in minimising your mood swings. Joining a **support group** or finding a circle of **understanding friends** can help you accept the symptoms of menopause and deal with them appropriately. Friends can also make you **laugh**, which is one of the most effective mood-improvers ever.

(Source: Epigee Women's Health, 2007)

From: Dr John Barletta MAPS
Clinical Psychologist
Level 1, Suite 2
3 Days Rd, Grange 4051
☎ 3356 4400
john@johnbarletta.com
www.johnbarletta.com

MENOPAUSE Part 2

Menopause is the term for the end of a woman's menstrual periods. It is a natural part of aging & occurs when the ovaries stop making hormones called estrogens. This causes estrogen levels to drop & leads to the end of menstrual periods. This usually happens between the ages of 45 & 60, but it can happen earlier.

Links between Menopause, Mood & Sexual Function

The brain responds to estrogen. Estrogen is thought to be important in memory & the healthy functioning of nerve cells in the brain. Some studies have shown that estrogen replacement therapy can preserve brain activity & even improve memory.

Depression may also be more likely in the years right before menopause. However, it is unclear whether depression is linked to low levels of estrogen or to the many changes women face during their 40s & 50s (e.g., career or marriage pressures, care of children, aging parents).

Low estrogen levels are linked to some uncomfortable symptoms in many women. The most common & easy to recognise symptom is hot flushes i.e., sudden intense waves of heat & sweating. Some women find that these hot flushes disrupt their **sleep** & others report **mood changes**. Other symptoms may include irregular periods, vaginal or urinary tract infections, urinary incontinence (i.e., leakage or inability to control flow) & inflammation of the vagina. Because of the changes in the urinary tract & vagina, some women may have discomfort or pain during sexual intercourse. Many women also notice changes in their skin, digestive tract & hair during menopause.

For most women, the symptoms of menopause last for a relatively short time. However, a woman's level of estrogen naturally remains low after menopause. This can affect many parts of the body, including the sexual & urinary organs, the heart & the bones. So in that sense, the changes of menopause will be lifelong. But **eating well, exercising** & making other **positive lifestyle changes** can help a woman feel great & live a healthy life after menopause.

Many women say that their **sexual desire** lessens during the time of menopause. In many cases, the cause is physical. For instance, because lower estrogen levels sometimes cause physical changes in a woman's sexual organs, having sex may become uncomfortable or painful so it is important to find out whether there is a physical cause for lack of desire. For some women, taking hormones called androgens can help restore sexual desire.

Some women find that sexual desire changes because of how they **feel about themselves** during menopause. **Counselling** (& support groups) can help women learn strategies for coping with the physical & emotional changes that occur during menopause.

Many menopausal women have problems with **short-term memory**; like forgetting the location of car keys or eyeglasses, skipping appointments they didn't remember, or losing the end of a thought when speaking or writing. These may be due to a busy lifestyle &/or stress at home or work. Studies have shown distinct differences in memory in women with active ovaries producing estrogen or are taking estrogen replacement therapy, compared to women with low levels of estrogen due to menopause.

Menopause is a natural part of life, not a disease or a health crisis. However, menopause may occur when many other changes are happening in your life. Your children may be marrying or leaving home, your parents may be ill or dying, or you may be wondering what you'll do when you retire from work. That's why it is probably more helpful to think of how your daily activities & lifestyle will affect menopause. Making sure that you **exercise** & **eat well** can make a real difference in **how you feel** & can even help prevent some of the long-term effects that are linked to estrogen deficiency (e.g., heart disease, osteoporosis).

Physical changes do occur with menopause & with aging. But the changes that happen during this time can be minimised by **healthy living** & a **sense of purpose** in life. *(Source: Foundation for Better Health Care, 2007)*