

Women's Health Program: Menopause

- Menopause is a normal part of aging and occurs when a person has not had a menstrual period for 12 consecutive months.
- While some people go through menopause without needing treatment, many find symptoms of menopause uncomfortable and can benefit from assistance in managing symptoms.
- There are three stages of menopause: perimenopause, menopause, and post-menopause.
 - **Perimenopause** is the time leading up to menopause when your ovarian function starts to decline. Some people start having hot flashes, night sweats, or changes in menstrual periods during this time. Your periods may be longer or shorter, heavier or lighter. During perimenopause, you may need to use birth control if you are at risk for pregnancy.
 - **Menopause** occurs when you have not had a menstrual period for 12 months in a row. The average age of last menstrual period is age 52. Menopausal symptoms vary for each person. You may have sudden symptoms that occur only occasionally or that occur more often. In addition to irregular periods, you may have:
 - Hot flashes
 - Night sweats
 - Sleep problems
 - Mood changes
 - Vaginal dryness, which may make sexual activity uncomfortable or painful
 - Changes in interest in sexual activity
 - Weight gain
 - Thinning hair and dry skin
 - Loss of breast/chest fullness
 - Anxiety or depression. These symptoms could be worse for those who have [posttraumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](#). Talk to your VA primary care provider if you are experiencing mental health concerns. Treatment options are available and effective.
 - **Post-menopause** occurs when some of the above-described symptoms gradually decline, but because of decreased estrogen production, risks for certain conditions, including vaginal dryness, urinary incontinence, heart disease, and osteoporosis, increase.
- If you stop having your menstrual period before age 40, contact your VA primary care provider to find out if you are going through menopause or if there is another cause for your missed periods.
- The most effective treatment for moderate to severe perimenopausal and menopausal symptoms is hormone therapy. Hormone therapy is safe for most people. Some facts about hormone therapy:
 - Low-dose estrogen therapy, usually a pill or a patch, is most effective for relief from hot flashes and night sweats.
 - Progesterone therapy is needed with estrogen therapy if you still have your uterus. If you take estrogen without progesterone, you may increase your risk for developing uterine cancer.

- Estrogen therapy alone may lower breast cancer risk, while estrogen-progesterone therapy may increase the risk. It is important to talk with your VA provider about the best options for you.
- Local hormone treatment applied directly to the vagina in the form of cream, pills, or a vaginal ring can help with vaginal dryness or pain during sexual activity.
- While hormone therapy is the most effective treatment, lifestyle changes may also help manage perimenopausal and menopausal symptoms, including:
 - Dress in layers.
 - Drink cold beverages.
 - Eat a healthy diet. If you need help getting started, check out the [Healthy Teaching Kitchen Program for](#) cooking classes, healthy recipes, nutrition information, and other resources.
 - Exercise regularly; if you need help, try the [VA MOVE! Weight Management Program.](#)
 - Get a healthy amount of sleep. Try using a fan. Talk to your health care provider if you're having sleep problems.
 - Try meditation or yoga, available through [VA Whole Health.](#)