

Menopause without Hormones

Healthy lifestyle choices

This handout explains ways to deal with menopause symptoms without using medicines. These methods are safe for almost all women. Check with your healthcare provider to make sure that these methods are right for you.

What is menopause?

Menopause is the time when menstrual periods stop. It is often called the “change of life.” Menopause changes can happen over time. But they can occur quickly when you have:

- Chemotherapy
- Surgery to remove the ovaries (*hysterectomy*)

There are many ways to treat symptoms. Most do not involve taking the hormone estrogen, which is not advised for breast cancer survivors.

What are the symptoms of menopause?

Even when menopause occurs naturally, it affects women differently. When women go through menopause, they may have:

- Hot flashes
- Stress and anxiety
- Mood changes or depression
- Higher risk of *osteoporosis* (brittle bones) and *cardiovascular* (heart) disease



Talk with your care provider if you have any questions about your menopause symptoms.

Hot Flashes

During a hot flash, your skin suddenly heats up and you start to sweat. Some women call them “power surges.”

Hot flashes can occur day or night. They vary in how often they occur, and how strong they are.

Here are some ways to help manage hot flashes:

- **Avoid triggers.** Caffeine, alcohol, hot spices, tight clothing, hot weather, and strong emotions such as anxiety can all trigger a hot flash.
- **Exercise.** Walk, swim, bicycle, or find another activity that you enjoy. Exercise most days of the week for a total of 30 to 60 minutes a day. You can divide your daily exercise time into 2 or 3 sessions, if needed.
- **Eat soy foods.** Some women find that eating more soy helps with hot flashes. Tofu, tempeh, edamame, and soy nuts are good sources of plant estrogens (*phytoestrogens*).
 - If your immune system is weak, be sure to cook tofu before eating.
 - Large doses of phytoestrogens in pill or powder form might cause tumors to grow in women with hormone-receptor positive breast cancer. If you have this type of cancer, it may be safer to eat no more than 2 to 4 servings a week of soy products.
- **Try complementary treatments.** These treatments can include herbs such as the herb black cohosh, acupuncture, and relaxation techniques such as paced breathing. Check with your provider before using supplements. Some herbs contain phytoestrogens, which some breast cancer patients should avoid.
- **Ask your provider about prescription medicines.** There are non-estrogen treatments for hot flashes.
 - Effexor and some other antidepressants have been shown to decrease hot flashes in breast cancer patients.
 - Gabapentin, a non-hormonal drug, has been shown to be as effective as estrogen in reducing hot flashes.
 - Clonidine, a blood pressure medicine, can help with hot flashes.
- **Stay cool.** Use fans and open windows when warm. Dress in layers and choose natural fabrics. Drink at least 8 glasses of cool water a day.
- **Reduce stress.** Practice a stress reduction method, such as paced breathing, every day. Then use it when you feel a hot flash coming on.

Stress

If hormonal changes, mood shifts, medical treatments, or life changes create stress, it is a good time to discover or rediscover ways to reduce that stress. These methods are useful for reducing stress at any time of life:

- **Stay connected** with your community. Nourish your friendships and close relationships.
- **Find a support group** you like. Being involved in a group can help you live longer.
- **Take charge.** Feeling in charge of your health helps ease despair. Choose healthcare providers you are comfortable with. Learn about your treatment options, and work with your providers to choose your treatments.
- **Learn to relax.** Avoid tranquilizers. Instead, learn and practice activities that renew your spirit and inner peace. These include relaxation exercises, prayer, meditation, yoga, slow breathing, and humor.
- **Have a sense of purpose.** Find meaningful and creative activities. Volunteer or become involved in community service.
- **Be physically active.** Regular, enjoyable exercise improves mood and body image, reduces stress, and increases feelings of self-control. Exercise increases your body's natural "feel good" hormones. Try to do some type of exercise every day. Exercise every day with a spouse, friend, or family member to increase your quality time together.
- **Consider using homeopathic remedies.** See a qualified naturopath.
- **Consider psychotherapy or counseling** with a therapist. Choose someone who you feel comfortable with, who meets your needs.
- **Allow yourself to grieve** the loss of fertility and the changes in your life.

Building Strong Bones and a Healthy Heart

Regular exercise and a healthy diet are a vital part of maintaining the health of your heart and bones. Bones become stronger when you eat enough calcium and vitamin D, **and** you do weight-bearing exercise. A low-fat diet and regular exercise help reduce heart disease and the recurrence of breast cancer.

To help prevent osteoporosis and heart disease:

- **Enjoy exercise.** Do at least 30 to 60 minutes of a moderate weight-bearing activity every day. Try using free weights, doing yoga or tai chi, walking, stair climbing, or dancing. These activities improve bone mass and balance, and reduce your risk of heart disease.
- **Get enough calcium.** Most women should get 1,200 mg of calcium a day. Women who are *osteopenic* or *osteoporotic*, or do not take hormone therapy, should get 1,500 mg a day.

Calcium is found in dairy products, calcium-fortified juice and soy milk, dark green vegetables, dried beans, and calcium supplements.

- **Get enough vitamin D.** Vitamin D helps the body absorb calcium. Current recommendations for vitamin D are 600 to 800 IU a day. Vitamin D can be found in fortified foods, such as milk and juices, and in some fish. Most women require a multivitamin that contains vitamin D or an individual vitamin D supplement.
- **Eat a heart-healthy diet.** Choose foods that are low in salt, cholesterol, and fat. Avoid all saturated fat. Eat a wide variety of vegetables, fruits, and whole grains. Ask your provider about a referral to a dietitian to talk about your specific needs.
- **Do not smoke.** Smoking increases heart attacks and osteoporosis. It is the cause of about 1 of every 5 deaths in the US.
- **Manage stress.** (See pages 2 and 3).
- **Maintain a good body weight.** Being overweight by 20% or more increases your risk of heart disease, cancer recurrence, and *lymphedema*. Abdominal fat, in particular, puts you at high risk for heart disease, diabetes, and cancer.
- **If needed, consider medicines.** Approved medicines for preventing or treating osteoporosis are the *bisphosphonates*, (Fosamax, Actonel, Boniva) and the *selective estrogen receptor modulator raloxifene* (Evista). Tamoxifen (Nolvadex), which is often used to treat breast cancer, also helps protect bones. For heart disease, make sure your cholesterol level, blood pressure, and blood sugar (if you have diabetes) are well controlled.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

UW Medicine Women's Health Care Center:
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