



Menopause

Prepared by the Glen Rock Board of Health

Recently, there has been more focus in the news on menopause and its treatment, or lack of treatment (for example NY Times Magazine, February 5, 2023). Menopause is defined as occurring when a woman has not had a period in twelve months and is no longer fertile. The transitional time prior to menopause is called perimenopause. During this time, periods are usually irregular, lasting shorter or longer than usual, and the flow may be more or less than usual. It is a natural process that occurs when a woman's ovaries no longer release eggs and the levels of the hormones estrogen and progesterone decrease. Most women go into menopause between the ages of 45 and 55. Menopause can also be triggered by surgical removal of the ovaries, a hysterectomy, chemotherapy, or hormone therapy.

About 85% of women experience symptoms, though the severity varies greatly. These symptoms usually begin during perimenopause and may continue into postmenopause. Symptoms may include hot flashes, incontinence, insomnia, vaginal dryness, mood changes, memory problems, and a change in body shape. Hot flashes may last only a few seconds or last ten minutes or more. They can be occasional or frequent. They may cause night sweats which may aggravate the insomnia that some experience. Urine may leak during coughing, sneezing or exercise. Vaginal dryness may cause pain during sex.

Treatment may include lifestyle changes and both hormonal and nonhormonal medications. Smoking, alcohol, spicy foods and caffeine may make symptoms worse. Hot flashes occur more often in people who are overweight. Mindfulness meditation may help with hot flashes. Lubricants can be used for vaginal dryness. Paroxetine, an antidepressant, is sometimes prescribed for hot flashes. Ospemifene and prasterone are nonhormonal treatments that are approved for hot flashes.

Hormone treatments are very effective in treating menopausal symptoms. There are some increased medical risks associated with the use of estrogen and progesterone. These risks vary with age and family history and should be discussed with your physician before deciding on the use of hormones. Hormonal vaginal creams treat some menopausal symptoms and provide lower hormone doses to the body than oral and patch options.

NIH funded researchers have created an online tool My Menoplan (mymenoplan.org) which can be used to help develop a plan based on your options and preferences. This, in conjunction with a discussion with your physician, is a good way to decide how to best deal with menopausal symptoms. It is important to not assume that you have to suffer if you are experiencing symptoms of menopause. Treating these symptoms can help you enjoy this new phase of your life.

