

Am I perimenopausal or menopausal?

As every woman's experience of menopause is different, there are a wide range of symptoms that could indicate that you're entering the perimenopause or menopause. To make things even more confusing, these symptoms can come and go as your hormone levels change.

You might experience physical symptoms like hot flushes, aches and pains, and bladder or urinary problems, or psychological symptoms, such as mood swings, anxiety, and brain fog. Many women suffer from a combination of these.

In some cases, these symptoms last for just a few months, but you might find that they last for several years. Fortunately, there are lots of treatments and lifestyle adjustments that can help you have a more positive experience of perimenopause and menopause.

What's the first symptom of the perimenopause?

You might assume that you won't notice any menopause symptoms until you're well into your 50s. So you might be surprised to hear that there's a good chance that you'll experience some changes in your 40s. Some women experience symptoms in their 30s, or even younger – so you might not realise that they could be linked to perimenopause.

It's likely that changes to your periods will be the first real sign you're entering the perimenopause / menopause. Fluctuating hormones could make your periods lighter, heavier, closer together or further apart. Eventually your periods will probably become less and less frequent, before stopping altogether. When you haven't had a period for 12 consecutive months, you have reached the menopause.

What are the most common symptoms of perimenopause?

Cells throughout your body respond to oestrogen, which is why you might notice lots of different and unexpected symptoms when your hormones begin to fluctuate.

Hot flushes:

This is the most common symptom, which affects three out of four women. You might experience these as a sudden feeling of heat which spreads through your face, neck, chest and body. Some women also experience intense sweating, and it's common to feel flushed, dizzy, or have heart palpitations at the same time.

Night sweats:

If you sometimes wake up drenched in sweat and need to change your pyjamas or bed sheets, then you're experiencing night sweats. Like hot flushes, these are very common. Night sweats can disrupt your sleep, waking you up several times in the night, and causing chills as your body cools down.

Mood swings:

This is a common psychological symptom of the perimenopause, and can have a negative affect on your relationships. You might feel unusually irritable and quick to anger, frustrated, anxious or tearful.

Alternatively, you might feel flat and joyless – or you might feel all of these things, one after the other. You're more likely to suffer from menopausal mood swings if you've experienced PMS or postnatal depression in the past. This is because your body is particularly sensitive to changing levels of hormones.

Problems sleeping:

There are lots of reasons why you might suffer from tiredness and insomnia, including night sweats, stress and anxiety. But if you're having trouble falling or staying asleep, this could also be caused by low levels of the hormones progesterone and testosterone, which begin to drop during the perimenopause.

Brain fog:

We have hormone receptors in our brains so, when your oestrogen, progesterone and testosterone levels begin to fall, this can cause brain fog, forgetfulness and poor concentration.

There are many more symptoms associated with the perimenopause or menopause, so take a look at the symptoms list article.

Have I reached the menopause?

You've officially reached menopause when you haven't had a period for 12 months in a row. After this point you enter postmenopause. Most women will have reached this stage by the age of 54, and symptoms like hot flushes and night sweats may begin to ease.

However, many women continue to experience menopause symptoms for around four years after their last period, and sometimes even longer. At this stage you may notice new symptoms, such as trouble sleeping, low energy and vaginal dryness. If any of these are affecting your quality of life, it's best to talk to your doctor as there are a range of treatments which can help.