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## Menopause: Myths and Facts

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For most women, menopause no longer signals the end of life but the beginning of a new and rich life phase. By taking an objective look at the positives and negatives women will be better able to make health and lifestyle decisions that will serve them well for this next stage.

The perimenopausal period typically begins in a woman's late 40s and lasts about four years. This is a time when hormone levels fluctuate, bleeding may be heavy and periods erratic. Menopause has arrived when a woman has been without menstrual periods for 6 months. The average age of menopause in the United States is 51.

Menopause is associated with a long list of problems including weight gain, memory loss, insomnia, hot flashes, mood disorders such as depression and serious health problems such as heart disease and osteoporosis.

Higher estrogen levels enjoyed by women during the childbearing years are believed to be protective against heart disease. It was that belief that fueled the enthusiasm for hormone replacement therapy (HRT) that has been shown by the Women's Health Initiative study to actually increase the risk of blood clots and strokes.

Although HRT does protect against loss of bone mineral density that can lead to osteoporosis, weight-bearing exercise and a diet high in calcium and vitamin D can protect bone health.

**Vasomotor symptoms**, in the form of hot flashes and night sweats, are the most common symptom of menopause. Hot flashes are sometimes accompanied by night sweats that can interfere with sleep.

Estrogen replacement is the most effective treatment for hot flashes but since the publication of the Women's Health Initiative study questioning the safety of hormone replacement therapy many women are reluctant to use HRT. Although it is still prescribed for women with severe symptoms, patients and their physicians have to consider the risks versus benefits.

Alternatives to HRT for hot flashes include lifestyle measures aimed at maintaining a cool environment, dressing in layers, using a fan and learning breathing techniques, relaxation therapy or

biofeedback.

**Vaginal dryness** is another common problem encountered by women after menopause. Some physicians prescribe estrogen patches or creams that deliver a lower dose of estrogen than oral forms.

**Weight gain** is common around the time of menopause, although it's difficult to determine whether the weight gain is the result of menopause or aging. Women typically gain 12 pounds in the eight years after menopause. Weight gain is not inevitable during these years. Women who exercise and focus on a healthy diet can maintain a stable weight and improve their overall health.

**Depression and other mood disorders** are frequently blamed on menopause, but population-based studies have not confirmed an increase in mood disorders in the post-menopausal years.

**Insomnia** is a frequent complaint in the second half of life, and not necessarily related to menopause. Hot flashes and night sweats create sleep disturbances for some women, but other sleep problems are believed to be related to aging rather than to menopause. Sleep becomes less efficient with age and one third of older Americans, both men and women, suffer from insomnia.

**Higher body weight** used to be considered protective against hot flashes and other symptoms of menopause. Fat cells produce estrogen so it was believed that higher estrogen levels would translate into fewer menopausal symptoms. Data from SWAN (Study of Women's Health Across the Nation) which enrolled more than 3000 women found just the opposite. Obese women reported a significantly higher number of hot flashes and night sweats than normal weight women.

A woman's beliefs about menopause as well as her own social situation (which includes factors such as social support and having enough income to buy the necessities of life) can affect the way she experiences menopause.

Menopause is a natural transition that some women move through effortlessly. Others struggle with uncomfortable symptoms. The focus for women needs to be on maintaining or adopting healthy lifestyle measures that will protect heart and bone health in the coming decades. Not smoking, eating a heart-healthy diet with plenty of calcium and getting regular weight-bearing exercise are steps a woman can take to ensure the last third of her life is active and focused on self-fulfillment.

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