

HIV AND MENOPAUSE

MENOPAUSE IS A NORMAL PART OF LIFE FOR ALL WOMEN AND PEOPLE ASSIGNED FEMALE AT BIRTH.

It happens when your body stops releasing eggs and making certain hormones (oestrogen, progesterone and less testosterone). This means your periods stop.

Menopause can bring changes to your body, feelings and thinking. These changes can be mild or strong, short-term or long-lasting. You can get support to feel more comfortable during this time.

MENOPAUSE AND HIV

If you are living with HIV, menopause might start a couple of years earlier. Some HIV and menopause symptoms can be similar, like night sweats, mood changes, tiredness and joint pains.

It is important to keep taking your HIV medication and talk to your doctor about any changes and symptoms. There are safe treatments for menopause symptoms for women living with HIV, both hormone and options without hormones. Your doctor can help you find what works best for you.

STAGES OF MENOPAUSE

Menopause happens in 3 stages:

PERIMENOPAUSE: the years before menopause. Hormone levels go up and down, periods change, and symptoms may start. You might have longer gaps between periods, and they may change to be heavier or lighter. This stage can last 3 to 7 years. You can still get pregnant so you should still think about contraception if needed.

MENOPAUSE: if you have not had a period for 12 months, this is menopause. Your body stops making oestrogen, progesterone and less testosterone, and you can no longer get pregnant. The average age is 51, but this may happen sooner for women living with HIV.

POSTMENOPAUSE: the time after menopause. Some menopause symptoms may continue. In some women, menopause can happen earlier (under the age of 45) due to natural causes or because of surgery, cancer and other treatments.

COMMON SYMPTOMS

As your hormone levels drop, you might notice:

Body symptoms

- Irregular periods
- Hot flushes
- Night sweats
- Muscle and joint pain
- Trouble sleeping
- Fast or strong heartbeat
- Hair and skin changes

Mind symptoms

- Brain fog, trouble focusing
- Difficulty in remembering things
- Mood changes (feeling low or anxious)

Sexual symptoms

- Less interest in sex
- Vaginal or vulva dryness, itchiness, or pain
- Bladder changes or urinary tract symptoms (needing to go to the toilet more often)

These symptoms can be similar to HIV symptoms. Talk to your HIV doctor, they can check what's going on and help with treatment.

HEALTH AFTER MENOPAUSE

Lower oestrogen levels can raise your risk of:

- Heart disease and stroke
- Weaker bones and osteoporosis
- Type 2 diabetes and unplanned weight gain
- Memory problems and dementia
- Bladder issues and incontinence.

Some HIV medicines also increase the chance of these health issues. Speak with your doctor about ways to manage this and protect your health.

TREATMENT AND MANAGEMENT

You can improve your symptoms with hormone treatments or treatments without hormones, or a mix of both.

HORMONE OPTIONS

- **Menopausal Hormone Treatment (MHT):** Also known as hormone replacement therapy (HRT). MHT uses hormones like oestrogen and progestogen to help with symptoms and to protect long-term health. MHT is the most effective treatment for a range of symptoms. It works best when you start in perimenopause or within 10 years of menopause. MHT can be taken as a tablet, patch, gel, or spray. It is safe for women with HIV, but some HIV medicines may not work well with MHT. Talk with your doctor about the benefits and risks of MHT, and finding a type that works with your medicine.
- **Vaginal oestrogen:** Can help with vaginal dryness and pain during sex. Can be a cream, tablet or ring, and is put in the vagina. Your body only takes in a small amount of hormone to help with symptoms in that part of the body.

NON HORMONE OPTIONS

- **Healthy lifestyle:** Being active and eating a range of food groups can improve mood, strengthen bones, and support a healthy weight. Reduce alcohol, smoking and eating spicy foods, because they can make symptoms worse.
- **Stay cool:** Wear light clothes, use fans, keep your bedroom cool, and drink cold water.
- **Complementary treatments:** Vitamin E, acupuncture, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), hypnosis, and yoga can improve symptoms. Talk to your doctor before trying new treatments.
- **Mental health support:** Hormone changes can affect your mood. Your GP can help you access counselling services or specific medication.
- **Peer and partner support:** Talking with other women living with HIV and going through menopause can help. HIV services have groups and events to connect with peers and support.
- **Sexual comfort:** Vaginal moisturisers and lubricants can make sex more comfortable.

TIPS FOR MANAGING MENOPAUSE

- Talk with your GP or HIV doctor about any symptoms or changes.
- Ask about MHT or other treatment that may suit you.
- Use contraception during perimenopause if you don't want to get pregnant. Keep using it until you have no period for 12 months.

Track your period and symptoms. This can help you and your doctor see symptom changes and what treatment works for you

USEFUL CONTACTS

Pozhet (Heterosexual HIV Service)

Support, information, referrals for heterosexuals living with or at risk of HIV.
Website: www.pozhet.org.au
Email: pozhet@pozhet.org.au

Multicultural HIV and Hepatitis Service (MHAHS)

Information and support for individuals and communities from culturally diverse backgrounds.
Phone: 1800 108 098
Website: www.mhahs.org.au
Email: info@mhahs.org.au

Positive Life NSW

Positive Life NSW is a peer-led and run community organisation which provides free services for all people living with HIV in NSW. This includes peer support (by and for people living with HIV), HIV health, wellbeing, prevention, testing & treatment information, social groups and activities, referrals, & counselling services.
Phone: 1800 245 677
Website: www.positivelife.org.au
Email: contact@positivelife.org.au

Bobby Goldsmith Foundation (BGF)

Provides financial and practical support, case management, and programs to help people living with HIV maintain their independence and quality of life.
Phone: (02) 9283 8666
Website: www.bgf.org.au
Email: info@bgf.org.au

Women's Health Centres NSW

WHNSW Centres provide a unique, holistic, woman-centred approach to primary health care.
Website: info@whnsw.asn.au / womens-health-centres-nsw/
Email: info@bgf.org.au

