

Ride out the storm

BE READY Perimenopause can set in months or years ahead of your menopause. Take up exercise to combat bone loss and mood swings, advises **Dr Muhammed Majeed**

If you are a woman in your late 30s or 40s with irregular periods that are often accompanied by heavy bleeding, it is likely that you are going through perimenopause. This is the time when the oestrogen in your body dominates the other two hormones, progesterone and testosterone. As a result, hormonal balance goes for a toss.

Women experience a range of symptoms during this period. At times, it can also affect your memory, and your motivation and energy levels. This is due to a natural decline in reproductive hormones.

Also known as menopause transition, perimenopause can set in as early as a few years before menopause. For some women, it lasts just for a few months while for others, it can extend for a decade. The symptoms go on until the ovaries stop releasing the eggs.

The symptoms that women experience during this period include menstrual irregularity, hot flashes, anxiety, depression, insomnia, exhaustion and so on.

Keep a lookout

If you feel that you may be experiencing perimenopause, here are six key symptoms that you would need to keep a lookout for:

■ **Hot flashes:** They can last anywhere between a few seconds to 10 minutes, sometimes making you drop whatever you are doing to catch your breath. It can become very intense and cause heart palpitations and perspiration. Hot flashes accompanied by sweating at night interfere with your quality of sleep.

■ **Mood swings:** Experts believe these are the earliest signs of perimenopause. In fact, if you are suffering from depression or postpartum depression, then you

“ **BY MAKING NATURAL ADJUSTMENTS TO YOUR DIET AND LIFESTYLE, YOU CAN MANAGE THE SYMPTOMS WELL.** ”

might be even more prone to it. Nearly half of all women have mood swings associated with the changing levels of hormones. But mood swings may also be caused by factors other than hormones.

■ **Irregular periods:** As ovulation becomes erratic, the menstrual cycle also changes; it may be longer or shorter. You might experience light or very heavy bleeding. The number of periods are likely to eventually come down, but they may still be heavy.

■ **Vaginal dryness:** When the oestrogen level starts diminishing, vaginal tissues lose lubrication and elasticity, making sexual intercourse painful. You may also be more vulnerable to urinary or vaginal



infections and the loss of tissue tone may contribute to urinary incontinence.

■ **Cognitive problems:** Many women will start to experience forgetfulness and will have a hard time concentrating. The effect is temporary as the memory function improves post menopause.

■ **Changing libido:** Sexual desires may change if a woman has had satisfactory sexual activity prior to perimenopause.

■ **Weight gain:** Declining oestrogen levels can lead to an increase in LDL cholesterol and loss of bone, making perimenopausal women susceptible to osteoporosis and weight gain.

If you are a woman in your late 30s or 40s and you have not got your period for over three months, it might be an indication of the arrival of menopause.

Symptoms tend to intensify as menopause gets closer and become worse one or two years before and after menopause. Women who smoke, have a family history of early menopause and have been treated for cancer can possibly experience perimenopause, reveal some studies.

Reducing the effects

The severity of these symptoms can be reduced by doing some of the following:

■ **Exercise:** It helps elevate your mood and improve quality of sleep. It builds

muscle and may reduce bone loss and fractures, which become more common as oestrogen production falls. Do a combination of weight training and cardio for 30 minutes every day.

■ **Ease hot flashes:** Keep a note of what triggers hot flashes. It could be tea, coffee or even the food you eat. It could be a stuffy bedroom or a stressful day. Noting them down will help you figure out the frequency and the triggers, letting you control them.

■ **Alleviate stress:** During perimenopause, many women feel stressed, depressed and anxious. Hence, a lot of them are prescribed anti-depressants. Instead, try the natural way to help deal with stress. Try yoga or tai chi or zumba. Eat a balanced and nutritious diet and think positive thoughts.

■ **Herbal remedies:** There are many herbal remedies such as black cohosh, passion flower, chaste berry, wild yam and *ashwagandha* that can be used as adaptogens. It could also be a combination of calcium and oestrogen supplements, which will help you to stave off bone loss.

By making natural adjustments to your diet, you can manage the perimenopausal symptoms well.

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