

Menopause: What is it and how can physical therapy help?

What is menopause?

Menopause is a stage in a woman's life when she stops having periods. This occurs when a woman stops producing eggs and is a natural life event. Menopause has 3 stages: perimenopause, menopause, and post menopause. The perimenopause, or menopause transition, is the time from the first onset of symptoms to 12 months after the last menstrual period. The transition can vary in length for each woman, but symptoms can occur 1-3 years prior to the last period. Women reach menopause at different ages, but most women reach menopause between the ages of 45-55. Premature menopause occurs when a woman has her last period before the age of 40. This can occur naturally or secondary to medical treatments, such as chemotherapy, surgery, or radiotherapy.

What you may experience:

- **Hot flashes or sweating:** Hot flashes may be associated with sweating, palpitations, and a 'sudden wave of heat', especially around the neck or face. This can worsen at night and disturb sleep.
- **Vaginal Discomfort:** The lining of the vagina becomes thinner and less elastic and there may be less vaginal lubrication. This may cause intercourse to become less comfortable.
- **Urinary Problems:** Decreased elasticity and decreased blood flow to the bladder may affect bladder tone and cause urine to be passed when coughing or sneezing (stress incontinence) or can make you feel like you need to rush to the bathroom (urgency).
- **Body Changes:** There can be changes during perimenopause, such as dry skin, increased facial hair, joint pain, and loss of breast tissue.
- **Osteoporosis:** Characterized by thinning of the bones, osteoporosis leads to a greater chance of fractures occurring, particular in the spine, hip, and wrists. Loss of estrogen during and after menopause is the major cause of osteoporosis.
- **Changes in sexual function:** If physical changes, such as vaginal dryness and thinning of the vaginal walls lead to discomfort during sex, then vaginal lubricants, estrogen creams, hormone replacement therapy, and pelvic floor physical therapy may be able to help.

How can physical therapy help?

Pelvic floor PT is a treatment approach that uses the principles of physical therapy to provide a structured, effective, and safe reconditioning of pelvic floor connective tissues. The goal of treatment is to improve the function of the pelvic floor to alleviate pain, increase strength, and decrease dysfunction in the muscles. There are a variety of ways pelvic floor physical therapy can alleviate issues stemming from menopause:

- Reduce pelvic or vaginal pain during sex and daily life.
- Improve the occurrence of urgency or stress incontinence.
- Decrease tone in pelvic floor muscles to allow for proper relaxation and inherent reflexes to return.
- Improve nerve health and awareness of pelvic floor muscles involved in pleasurable sensations, which can help some women manage symptoms.
- Prevent or treat pelvic organ prolapse, in which the uterus, bladder, or rectum bulges into the vagina.
- Reduce risk and occurrence of bowel constipation.