

How Does Menopause Affect Sexuality?

Author: Kris Christiansen, MD, MSCP

Menopause, the natural biological process marking the end of a woman's reproductive years, typically occurs between the ages of 45 and 55. It is defined as the point when a woman has gone 12 consecutive months without a menstrual period, signaling the cessation of ovarian function.

The underlying process in menopause is the loss of reproductive hormones, especially estrogen. Estrogen is produced in the ovaries, and when the ovaries stop working, estrogen levels decrease dramatically and can cause several symptoms:

- Hot flashes and night sweats
- Vaginal dryness and painful sex
- Changes in sexual desire
- Urinary urgency, frequency, and leaking
- Urinary tract infections
- Anxiety and depression
- Brain fog
- Word finding problems
- Memory changes
- Difficulty sleeping
- Headaches
- Skin and hair changes
- Joint aches
- Weight gain



While menopause brings about several physiological changes, it also affects sexual health and intimacy in ways that can significantly impact a woman's life. These changes often start in perimenopause and understanding how life changes influence sexuality is essential for women, as well as for their partners and healthcare providers, to navigate this life stage with awareness and empathy.

Keep reading to learn more:

- Hormonal changes and their impact on sexual function
 - Vaginal dryness and vaginal atrophy
 - Changes in libido
 - Changes in genital sensation and pleasure
- Psychological and emotional factors
- Role of partner relationships
- Treatment and solutions for menopausal sexual issues

1. Hormonal Changes and Their Impact on Sexual Health

At the heart of menopause is the decrease in the production of the hormones estrogen, progesterone, and testosterone. These hormones play vital roles in regulating the menstrual cycle, maintaining vaginal health, and influencing sexual desire. As estrogen levels drop, several physical changes occur that can directly impact a woman's sexual experience.

- **Vaginal Dryness and Atrophy**

One of the most common and uncomfortable symptoms of menopause is vaginal dryness. Estrogen helps maintain the elasticity and moisture of the vaginal walls, and as its levels decline, the vaginal tissues can become thinner, drier, and less elastic. This condition, known as genitourinary syndrome of menopause (GSM), can lead to pain during intercourse, making sex less enjoyable or even downright painful. Vaginal dryness may also contribute to an increased risk of urinary tract infections (UTIs) and irritation.

Fortunately, various treatments are available, including vaginal lubricants, moisturizers, and estrogen therapy (topical or systemic), which can help alleviate these symptoms and improve sexual comfort.

- **Changes in Libido**

The hormonal fluctuations during menopause can also affect a woman's libido, or sexual desire. While some women report a decrease in sexual desire during menopause, others may experience an increase, often due to the cessation of menstrual cycles, which can bring a sense of freedom and relief from the worries of pregnancy or menstruation.

However, the reduction in estrogen, progesterone, and testosterone (which plays a role in sexual drive), can lead to a complex interplay of physical and emotional changes. For many women, the decreased estrogen levels contribute to a diminished libido, particularly if paired with other menopausal symptoms like fatigue, sleep disturbances, or mood changes. Emotional factors, including stress or depression, may also play a role in the decline of sexual interest.

- **Changes in Genital Sensation and Pleasure**

During menopause, hormonal changes—primarily a decline in estrogen—can significantly impact the genital area. The vaginal walls may become thinner, less elastic, and more prone to dryness, leading to discomfort or pain during sexual activity. Additionally, the clitoris and surrounding tissues might experience reduced sensitivity, making it harder to achieve arousal or orgasm. These changes can affect not only physical sensation but also emotional confidence and intimacy. Using a vibrator can help counter these effects by increasing blood flow, enhancing sensation, and maintaining the health of genital tissues through gentle stimulation and regular use.



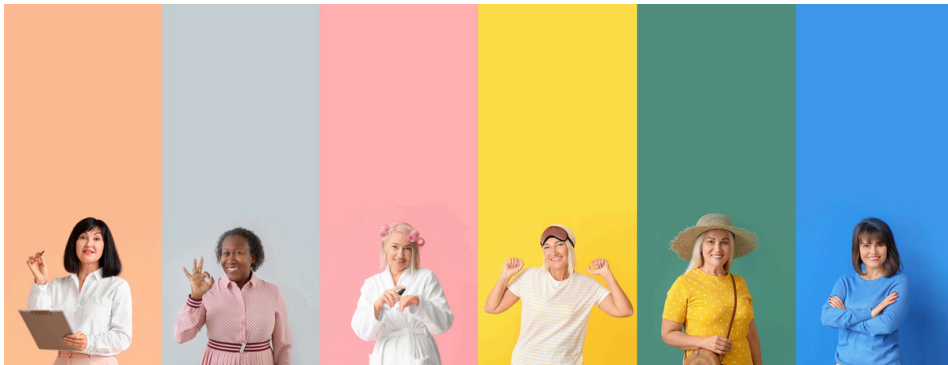
2. Psychological and Emotional Factors

Menopause is a significant life transition, and the psychological and emotional changes associated with this phase can also influence sexual wellbeing. Many women experience mood swings, anxiety, depression, or a sense of loss during menopause, which can affect their overall sense of self and their interest in sex.

Feelings of sadness, irritability, or frustration due to the physical symptoms of menopause may overshadow a woman's desire for intimacy. Moreover, changes in body image, including weight gain, skin changes, or loss of breast fullness, can lead to a lack of confidence, further decreasing sexual interest.

Additionally, menopause often coincides with other life changes, such as children leaving home (empty nest syndrome), retirement, or the loss of a loved one. These life transitions may heighten stress or feelings of isolation, further diminishing sexual desire.

On the flip side, some women experience an emotional liberation during menopause. Without the burden of menstruation or the possibility of pregnancy, many women report a renewed sense of freedom and self-awareness, which can lead to a more positive and fulfilling sexual life.



3. The Role of Partner Relationships

The effects of menopause on sexuality are not experienced in isolation. The dynamics of a woman's relationship with her partner play a crucial role in how she experiences this life change. Open communication about physical symptoms, desires, and concerns can help couples navigate the changes in their sexual relationship.

For some couples, menopause may prompt new conversations about intimacy and pleasure, while for others, it can introduce challenges. Partners who are supportive and understanding of the physical and emotional changes that accompany menopause tend to foster stronger, more resilient relationships. On the other hand, if menopause leads to communication breakdowns or misunderstandings, it can strain intimacy and cause emotional distance.

Menopause may also bring about a shift in sexual priorities. With the pressures of reproduction no longer a concern, many women may seek more pleasure-focused, relaxed forms of sexual activity. This could involve exploring new types of sexual intimacy, such as increased cuddling, touching, or experimenting with new positions that are more comfortable. Some couples find that this phase of life allows for more freedom and creativity in the bedroom.

4. Treatment and Solutions for Menopausal Sexual Issues

Several strategies and treatments can help manage the effects of menopause on sexuality. Depending on the severity of the symptoms and the individual needs of the woman, solutions may range from lifestyle changes to medical interventions.

Hormonal therapies: Estrogen therapy (ET) or menopausal hormone therapy (MHT) can help alleviate vaginal dryness, hot flashes, and other physical symptoms. Localized estrogen treatments, such as creams or suppositories, can directly target vaginal dryness without affecting the rest of the body.

Lubricants and moisturizers: Lubricants can alleviate vaginal dryness and discomfort during intercourse, while vaginal moisturizers used regularly can help restore moisture and elasticity.

Vibrators and other sexual “tools”: Hormonal changes during menopause can lead to decreased sensation, decreased arousal, and difficulty with orgasm. Vibrators and other items can provide enhanced stimulation for a more pleasurable experience.

Pelvic floor exercises: Improving the pelvic floor muscles through stretching and exercises can improve vaginal tone, enhance sexual sensation, and reduce urinary incontinence. Pelvic floor physical therapy can be very helpful.

Sex therapy and counseling: For women experiencing emotional or psychological challenges related to menopause and sexuality, therapy with a sex therapist or counselor can be invaluable. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and couples counseling may also help address emotional issues, improve communication, and restore intimacy.



Conclusion

Menopause marks a significant phase in a woman's life, bringing about a range of physical, emotional, and psychological changes that can influence sexuality. While hormonal fluctuations can lead to symptoms like vaginal dryness and reduced libido, emotional factors and the dynamics of partner relationships also play a key role in how menopause impacts sexual wellbeing. By exploring treatment options, maintaining open communication with partners, and seeking support when necessary, women can continue to enjoy a fulfilling and satisfying sexual life during and after menopause.

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