



The Menopause

with Dr Louise Newson

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What is the peri-menopause?

Breaking down the word can help us define this. 'Meno' means our menstrual cycle, 'pause' is stop, and 'peri' means 'around the time of'. Before our periods stop completely, we have changing hormone levels, but they don't just decline and stop – they fluctuate. This is the stage known as the peri-menopause. Classically, these symptoms start in our mid-forties but 51 is the average age.

Women who go through the menopause early, for whatever reason, if they are under the age of 45 have to take hormones – either HRT or the pill – because without the oestrogen in the body, they are at increased risk of heart attack, stroke, or osteoporosis.

What are the different hormones in the pill?

Similar to HRT, they are oestrogen and progesterone, but actually the hormones in HRT are much more natural and unlike the pill, not at all synthetic. The pill actually has more risk associated with it (because it's taken as a pill) in the form of blood clots. In HRT, the oestrogen can be given through a gel or patch. The pill can also often mask menopausal symptoms.

What are the symptoms of menopause?

Interestingly, most people actually don't come into the GP with menopausal symptoms, which sounds bizarre. If they do, it tends to be with hot flushes and night sweats. But most often, it's more often with the psychological symptoms, such as low self-esteem, low mood, poor concentration, tiredness, lack of self-worth and depression. Urinary symptoms, heart palpitations, migraines, and lack of sleep are also common.

Should we be taking HRT? Is it safe?

HRT simply stands for hormone replacement therapy and it is not one size fits all. It's much more tailor-made than that, and all natural, made from yams. The take-home message is that for the majority of women under 60, the benefits outweigh the risks. Taking HRT does not delay the menopause, but it does treat it by helping to give you those hormones back. This means that when you stop HRT, you're going to be exactly how you are, or would have been, if you'd never taken it. Your symptoms can carry on for up to ten years, although the average length of time is four years.

There is no increased risk of blood clots if you take HRT as a gel or a patch. For women under the age of 51 on HRT, there is no increased risk of breast cancer. For women that only have oestrogen, there is no increased risk of breast cancer. It's the progesterone which protects the lining of the womb that has an increased risk. The studies show a three-times increased risk if taken for over 15 years, but if you look at the risks of not taking HRT, this increases your general risk a lot more than if you do choose to take it.