

Early menopause as a result of your treatment

As a result of surgery, chemotherapy or radiation treatments you may find you no longer have menstrual periods and are suddenly thrown into menopause. As menopause is usually associated with growing older and is normally a gradual transition, the sudden onset of menopause can be both physically and emotionally difficult to handle. It may take you a while to adjust, not only to changing levels of hormones in your body, but to the fact that your symptoms belong to women of an older age group and signify the end of childbearing. The most common emotion surrounding early menopause is a sense of loss. For most women this becomes less painful in time, but it is important that you seek emotional support from friends, family members, a member of your treatment team or your local women's health clinic, if you are experiencing ongoing emotional or physical distress. Symptoms associated with menopause are: hot flushes, night sweats, vaginal dryness, mood swings, fuzzy thinking and forgetfulness, and problems with sleep. The following tips may help you deal with these troubling symptoms.

- **Hot flushes** (a hot flush is a sudden feeling of heat in the body that may last for several minutes. You may also find you sweat, go red in the face, and your heart may race). To help with this symptom try to avoid going out in the heat of the day, turn down heating in the home, wear cool, loose fitting clothes (preferably cotton) and avoid spicy foods.
- **Night sweats** (a night time version of hot flushes where you may find yourself waking up drenched in sweat). To help with this symptom try to keep your bedroom as cool as possible. If you find a doona too hot in winter, use blankets (preferably cotton), so you can throw off a layer or two when you feel too hot.
- **Vaginal dryness** Water based lubricants may be helpful. Talk to a member of your treatment team for advice.

"My feelings are still very fragile. I tend to have mood swings very easily and 'jump' at people I am very close to ... Make mountains out of molehills.... I find I have difficulty expressing myself, or finding the correct word. It's as though I have Alzheimer's...."

- **Fuzzy thinking and forgetfulness** Fuzzy thinking and difficulty in concentrating during menopause bother many women. The sudden change from being able to remember many things to forgetting many things can be very disturbing. Often women are afraid that it is the start of an ongoing decline and become afraid they are "going senile". The more anxious you become about this loss the more you are likely to be troubled by it. You can probably remember many times when you forgot where you put something and the more agitated you became the less effective you were in finding it. Perhaps you looked in the same

drawer for something over and over, becoming more and more distressed, only to have someone find it right where you had already looked. When we get agitated our recall of things is poor, so one way you can help yourself is to do everything you can to remain calm when you experience forgetfulness. It will not help if you tell yourself that you are “silly, stupid or going crazy”. Give yourself permission to forget some things while your body and brain is working flat out helping you cope with your diagnosis, treatment and the ongoing challenges cancer presents. A ‘to do’ list is also useful. Jot down appointments and other things you need to remember. In this way you don’t need to remember them. (Though you do need to remember where you left your list!)

- **Mood swings** It is not uncommon for women going through menopause to experience sudden changes in their mood. If you are dealing with menopause in addition to a cancer diagnosis understandably your moods may swing from high anxiety to low depression. It is common for women to also experience times of anger. If your symptoms are troubling you seek support from your health team.

- **Sleep difficulties** Night sweats are likely to disturb your sleep, however other worries may also be contributing to a difficulty in getting to sleep, or in staying asleep. It may help to avoid caffeine, alcohol, and heavy meals in the afternoon and evening. Also, go to bed at the same time each night, and make sure your bedroom is dark, quiet, and comfortable. If you find yourself lying in bed unable to sleep it is often better to get up and do something to take your mind off your concerns, and then return to bed when you are feeling more relaxed. A daily routine of gentle exercise and relaxation will also help.