

Perimenopause: hormonal upheaval

Perimenopause refers to the years of **hormonal upheaval** before your final menstrual period. This final period IS menopause (average age of 51) but we give it a whole year of absence before saying it is the last one. Perimenopause, which can last 2-10 years before that final period, is a state of body and mind, not a chronological destination. It begins with dropping progesterone levels (which directly affects sleep) and ends with dropping estrogen levels (responsible for vaginal dryness and decreased skin elasticity (everywhere)!) For some women, it is a time when mood becomes unpredictable, weight climbs, and energy wanes—and most commonly a conflation (or fusion) of all three (or worse a conflagration [a destructive fire] of sorts—sorry I have a junior studying for the SATs!)

Most women don't realize that perimenopause is much rockier and more difficult to navigate than menopause, because hormones fluctuate month to month, sometimes mildly and sometimes fiercely. You may find that old methods of coping such as occasional exercise, yoga once a week, chocolate, a glass of wine most nights, etc.) don't seem to work as well. Metabolism is less forgiving. You may feel more stressed out. Sleep erodes. Overreaction becomes the norm. Sometimes your spouse/partner feels like the enemy.

There is not one particular root hormonal cause of perimenopause. Instead, it is an expression of hormonal interdependence. In other words, you are not experiencing increased neurotic tendencies, but instead, the interplay of your major hormones at a time of great neuroendocrine chaos. This final life stage need not be a death march though middle age; perimenopause is simply a period of biological rough waters that can be navigated optimally with a smart captain at the helm of the ship. That means you, an educated you.

So what is going on? Let's start at the beginning. When you are 20 weeks in utero (still in your mother's womb) you have your largest supply of eggs. They start to diminish so at birth you have about 1-2 million immature "follicles". And we continue to lose eggs, so by puberty we are down to 300,000-400,000. Only 400 of these follicles will attain ovulation. The remaining eggs will be lost by a process called atresia (they degenerate and are absorbed by the body). As we approach menopause our egg supply is dwindling. Our **ovaries** have started to sputter and are no longer producing the same, predictable, and consistent levels of the sex hormones—*estrogen* and *progesterone*—that they used to.

To make matters worse, you **brain** is less responsive to the hormones your ovaries still do produce. The main change is that your ovaries no longer stay on task with monthly ovulation. They start to intermittently go offline. So your periods get shorter in frequency, or longer, or altogether unpredictable. But since your body is no longer producing ripe eggs, your **pituitary gland** cranks up the production of the control hormones—*follicle-stimulating hormone* (FSH) and *luteinizing hormone* (LH)—to stimulate the ovaries to do more. The ovaries hang a "semi-retired" sign in response, which only leads to harder working control hormones and higher FSH numbers. In the midst of all this, you may start to have magical thinking that having another baby—*quick before you can't*—is somehow a good idea. Remember: this is your hormones talking and not a logical response to your current reality. Soon your FSH numbers are reaching fifty and you're hot flashing and sweaty, officially and chemically menopausal, and you choose to get a dog instead of another child.

Next, your **thyroid** becomes sluggish. Your metabolism slows. Your weight climbs even if you eat less and exercise more. You start to feel depleted, and your mood becomes erratic.

Simultaneously, the **adrenal glands** get into the act. With all these hormonal changes, your stress response becomes heightened. You just can't roll with the punches the way you used to. You can't focus or concentrate. You don't have the energy to get anything done after the kids go to bed, and before you know it, it's midnight. You go to bed, but you wake up constantly, because you're hot, or you need to pee, or your husband is snoring.

Put it all together, and you have the **perfect neuroendocrine storm**: all three hormonal systems—ovaries, thyroid, adrenals—working together to pull the rug out from underneath you! Your new mantra is that life is unpredictable. You have three beautiful days of bliss followed by losing your mind completely when the school calls to report your child has lice. Irritability becomes a dominant state. Sex drive could use improvement, but meeting your husband in the middle feels too huge. Sugar, alcohol, and chocolate become a daily salve. Bear with me. We'll work together to help you reclaim your hormonal balance so you feel like your old self.

The Hormone Cure. Sara Gottfried, MD

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