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40+: TOO YOUNG TO THINK ABOUT MENOPAUSE?

Women at 40 often feel too young to start thinking about menopause. After all, it's only after 50 that we start to feel hot flashes, right? What most people don't know is that there are more than 100 menopause symptoms that we can begin to feel as early as 40. Hot flashes are just one symptom in this long list that we only encounter near the end, though, not all of us do. Bottom line: hot flashes or no flashes, if you're over 40, your journey through menopause may already be showing its first signs.

The first symptoms of perimenopause are related to our emotions. Lighter sleep, anxiety, bouts of deep sadness, unstable moods, irritability and fatigue are generally seen as the result of a busy life. Because this time of life is busy for many of us, symptoms of the onset of perimenopause can go unnoticed. As these symptoms can begin up to 10 years before menopause, it is common that we fail to realize what we are actually experiencing.

We usually begin to look into our fertility when we want to become pregnant, and so become armchair experts on estradiol, progesterone and testosterone, as well as the uterus, endometrium and ovaries. In fact, fertility deserves our attention even when we have no intention of getting pregnant. **Taking care of fertility is taking care of your general health.**

It's time to prepare for this transition

Women in their 40s often feel too young to think about menopause, but this is actually when we should begin preparing for the big changes that are coming. Look for information on pre- and post-menopause, get to know yourself to understand the changes your body is going through, build your support network of professionals and take control of your self-care and the necessary treatments to come. This is the time!

Here are some reasons why it's important for women in their 40s to start thinking about menopause:

Perimenopause: it's all hormonal

The hormonal fluctuations and imbalances that occur in a woman's body during perimenopause can impact her quality of life. During this period, the body begins its transition to menopause, which is defined as the time when a woman does not have a menstrual cycle for 12 consecutive months. Levels of the reproductive hormones estradiol and progesterone begin to fluctuate. In fact, it may be a relief for some women to know that mood swings, lack of focus, sadness and fatigue are caused by hormonal fluctuations. Because at this stage a woman often feels generally unwell and uncomfortable, going to the doctor and having tests come back negative will leave her with no diagnosis and no treatment. Medical exams in the early years of perimenopause reveal little despite symptoms that persist.

The first signs that a woman is entering perimenopause are emotional changes and changes in the menstrual cycle. Women may experience heavy bleeding, irregular menstruation and intense cramps, and these may last for longer or shorter periods of time than usual, and their frequency may change as well. Perimenopause is a phase similar to puberty, when a woman's body and life are also changing. It affects each woman differently, and the intensity, duration and frequency of symptoms vary from woman to woman. This is a natural change that all women will experience at one time or another, sooner or later.

Physical symptoms of perimenopause:

- changes in the menstrual cycle
- sleep disturbances
- headaches
- acne
- dry skin
- vaginal dryness
- changes in libido
- weight redistribution and weight gain
- hair loss
- dizziness
- urinary dysfunction
- unwanted hair growth
- water retention and bloating
- heart palpitations
- hot flashes
- night sweats

Emotional symptoms of perimenopause:

- anxiety
- short-term memory loss
- confused thinking
- difficulty multitasking
- fatigue
- mood changes
- difficulty concentrating
- anger
- sense of urgency

The sooner you become aware, the better

Empower yourself: knowledge about hormonal changes and their effects empowers women to be proactive and take steps to manage their health.

Reduce anxiety: understanding what to expect from menopause reduces fear and anxiety about the changes associated with it.

Manage symptoms: recognizing and addressing perimenopause symptoms early will vastly improve your quality of life. Treatments may include changes to your eating habits, lifestyle, supplements, and the way you relax and manage stress together with sleep and physical exercise. If appropriate for your symptoms and perimenopausal stage, hormone replacement therapy (HRT) can be a good option (always prescribed and monitored by a doctor who specializes in menopause).

Track symptoms: keeping a symptom diary can help you better understand the changes that are occurring in your body and how to best approach them. The diary also helps you adjust your nutrition plan and lifestyle. As complaints change, so do care needs.

Learn about preventive care: knowing about the effects of hormonal changes helps you invest in preventative healthcare in your 40s that can bring long-term benefits and help prevent common postmenopausal diseases: cardiovascular disease, osteoporosis, certain types of cancer, dementia and diabetes.

Manage stress: women in their 40s are often juggling multiple responsibilities including work, family and caregiving, which can lead to chronic stress. Stress can negatively impact hormonal health and worsen symptoms such as fatigue, insomnia and digestive problems. Building your personal care kit provides strategies for managing stress. Your kit may include nutrition, supplements, as well as techniques for managing your body's response to these challenges and promoting relaxation.

Practical tips for women in their 40s

- **Educate yourself:** read books, attend seminars and talk to professionals about peri- and post-menopause.
- **Create healthy habits:** develop healthy habits such as a balanced diet and regular exercise, and techniques for improving sleep and controlling stress.
- **Get regular check-ups:** routine healthcare check-ups become increasingly important at this stage. They help monitor risk factors such as blood pressure, altered cholesterol levels and low bone density.
- **Assess your nutrition and lifestyle:** periodically evaluating your habits is essential for adjusting your diet and lifestyle to promote health and well-being in the medium and long term.
- **Create a support network:** build a network of friends, family and professionals who can support you emotionally.
- **Connect with others:** participate in support groups or workshops where experiences and information can be shared.

While menopause may seem like a distant concern for women in their 40s, learning about the changes your body is going through is incredibly important. Also, taking care of yourself in natural, efficient and independent ways without **relying on medications that do not treat the underlying problems while also causing side effects and new problems** is quite a serious matter.

Gaining knowledge and preparing in advance mean that, in addition to enjoying greater well-being and health, your menopause and post-menopause will be happier and less eventful. And more: with milder symptoms and treatments that you choose for yourself in a safer and more empowered way. Taking proactive steps now will help you maintain long-term health and well-being.

Until next time and happy preparation for menopause!

Isabel.

• If you have questions, need nutritional advice or want to discuss a specific condition, please contact me, I will be happy to help.