

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE: SHOULD YOU CHANGE BEFORE 'THE CHANGE'?



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Half of the world's population experiences the menopause yet it is surrounded by silence, leaving millions of women to suffer alone. **Alice Ball** looks at whether young women could benefit by preparing for it earlier, and whether opening up the conversation could dismantle the stigma

When it comes to tackling the physical and emotional rollercoaster of puberty, most women are somewhat prepared. I seem to recall a slightly toe-curling lesson in school involving a tampon and a glass of water, before being given a whistle-stop tour of the birds and the bees. At home, I had a mother and older sister

on hand to calm my anxieties around teenage acne and to take the brunt of any premenstrual angst.

Yet when it comes to the menopause — an equally important phase in a woman's life — it seems many of us are woefully less prepared. Just recently, my own menopausal mother was telling me how she felt “blinded” by mood

swings and aching joints because “it was never spoken about growing up”. “This isn’t just ‘lockdown unfit’ achy,” she messaged me. “It’s ‘I feel about 85 achy’”.

Jackie Lynch, a registered nutritional therapist and author of *The Happy Menopause*, says she had one client who even mistook her symptoms for early

"She kept forgetting things, and she had brain fog and mood swings...and the doctor didn't join the dots. There's a real education issue out there, that's for sure"

onset Alzheimer's. "She kept forgetting things, and she had brain fog and mood swings," she says. "It turned out to be hormonal. But who knew? Nobody was telling her and the doctor didn't join the dots. There's a real education issue out there, that's for sure."

In a survey conducted by the British Menopause Society, one in two women had gone through the menopause within the past 10 years without consulting a healthcare professional. This is despite 42% of women reporting their symptoms being worse or much worse than expected, with 50% saying it had impacted their home life and more than a third reporting the intrusion on their professional life.¹

Most women understand that they will reach a time when their periods end, the average age being 51. But symptoms of the menopause begin years before a woman is officially 'in menopause'; defined as being without a menstrual period for 12 consecutive months.

These symptoms — known as the perimenopause — can include weight gain, insomnia, fatigue, hot flushes, brain fog, anxiety, mood changes and vaginal dryness. For most women, it starts in their early to mid-forties and lasts from around four to eight years — something which may come as a surprise to those who thought it'd be over in a 'hot flush'.

The good news is that diet and lifestyle can play a significant role in supporting a healthy and happy menopause, and the earlier you start, the more effective this approach can be.

"The right nutrition in your thirties

and forties, combined with a sensible work-life balance and regular exercise, lays the groundwork for a much easier menopause," says Lynch.

But what about those, including myself, who are more quarter-life than mid-life; is it ever too soon to start preparing for the menopause?

"The fundamentals of a good diet in your twenties would be great regardless [of menopause] and would by default, act as a hormone balancer which would benefit you further down the line," says Lynch. "But do you have to start in your twenties? I think it would depend on what you were doing. There's a vast difference between partying hard, having a few drinks and eating a bit of rubbish, versus partying *hard*."

She adds that for most women, it is the 10 years leading up to perimenopause that are most influential, although there is an "obvious logic" to the idea that the better you eat, the better you're going to feel.

"It's really hard to say 'oh if you start even earlier, your menopause will be even easier' because that's not necessarily going to follow. But it might."

Many of the changes women experience are due to the body producing less oestrogen which normally supports overall health as well as reproductive health. Women have oestrogen receptors located all over their body, and so Lynch describes menopause, when the ovaries stop producing oestrogen, as like going from having "a powerful battery pack" to "little double AAs".

"It affects our muscle tone and it affects our nerves," explains Lynch. "There are also oestrogen receptors in the brain which is why [menopause] can cause brain fog, anxiety and low mood. They're everywhere and they sort of power us." Lower levels of oestrogen even stop the body from holding water needed to hydrate the tissues around the joints and keep them flexible and mobile.

Resistance training

According to Lynch, some choices in early life can make a difference later on, such as those that impact bone density, which is then affected by the menopause.

"Whether you walked to school or



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were driven to school, whether you did regular exercise outside of school, or whether you drove everywhere in your twenties; all of these things can make a difference," she says.

Bone density declines gradually from the age of 30 and once a woman reaches menopause, this process accelerates, decreasing by up to 20% in the five to seven years after. Resistance training once or twice a week, using weights or bands, can help to increase muscle strength and activate bone renewal.

Eating plenty of fruit and vegetables can also help with hydration and keep joints subtle. Calcium-rich foods such as leafy green vegetables, sardines and dairy can support bone health. However, Lynch says there is "absolutely no point" in eating calcium-rich foods if vitamin D levels are low, because vitamin D is needed to absorb calcium effectively.

The other key area where women can "lay the groundwork" from a much earlier age is strengthening the pelvic floor, she says. "As you approach the menopause the lack of oestrogen will affect your muscles and muscle tone — that includes the pelvic floor muscle."

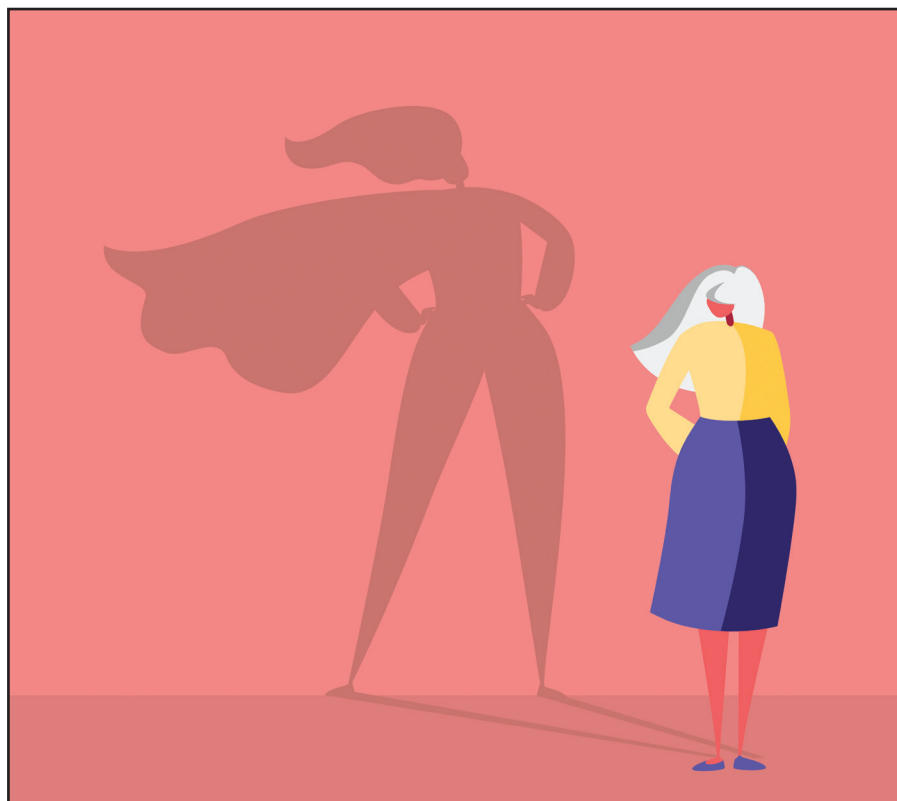
Perimenopausal women may start to notice that they have incontinence issues or that they 'leak' when they run, laugh or sneeze. According to Lynch, one in three women will experience this at some point in their lives.

"It's very common; it happens to women post-pregnancy as well," she says. "What would be really helpful is doing pelvic floor exercises from a much younger age. Like all muscles, if you tone it up you won't have all these issues."

Although the benefits of exercise are clear, Lynch warns that female endurance athletes should take care

"THE ICING ON THE CAKE"

According to Lynch, the "ideal diet" doesn't really change from whichever decade you're in. "Of course, there would be things therapeutically I'd look at differently," she says. "In your 30s you'd be looking more at supporting fertility, then as you get into your late 30s there's often more thyroid issues and stress so focusing on B-vitamins and magnesium. But that's the icing on the cake. You need to have the cake first; that's a good balance of macronutrients, blood sugar balance and plenty of vegetables."



throughout their twenties and thirties because they are more prone to low bone density. “What they’re doing might be great from an athletic perspective, but it might not be great from a longevity perspective as they get older,” she says. “They’ll likely be the ones who need to focus on bone density as they age and move into the menopause.”

Smoking and alcohol

Some lifestyle choices may also have an effect on later life. Studies have linked smoking and cigarette smoke exposure in adulthood to an earlier menopause and more severe menopause symptoms.³ Lynch also says that smoking, as well as long term drinking, have much longer term impacts on the body. “Those things can definitely make a difference,” she says. “What tends to

happen [with alcohol] is that the liver becomes a bit more congested and therefore can’t cope with quite so many toxins because you’ve been working it too hard. So just ease back a bit [as you get older].” Smoking can also decrease bone mineral density by 25%.

Maintaining a healthy weight

Being overweight has also been linked to more severe menopause symptoms. One study on almost 1,000 women aged 44-56 years in Korea found that women who were overweight or obese (defined as a BMI between 23-24.9kg/m² and above 25kg/m², respectively) suffered more severe hot flushes and night sweats than women with a normal BMI.⁴

Lynch also adds that post-menopausal women have an increased

“If you’re already following a hormone balancing diet, then you’ll be in better shape by the time you get to perimenopause”

risk of cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes, the risk of which will increase further for those who are overweight.

Trying to maintain a healthy weight and avoid the trap of yoyo dieting could therefore reduce the severity of symptoms at a later stage. Easier said than done — but stabilising your blood sugar levels could be a good place to start.

“Blood sugar is like nutrition 101,” says Lynch. “Get that right and the rest will follow.”

Balancing hormones

Because the ovaries stop producing oestrogen around the menopause, the adrenal glands take over as a weaker, back-up system. The adrenal glands, however, are also responsible for producing our stress hormones, cortisol and adrenaline, which means when they’re distracted, oestrogen production becomes neglected. Every time your blood sugar drops, explains Lynch, your body releases more cortisol and adrenaline. Keeping blood sugar levels stable through a diet of quality protein, wholegrains, fruits and vegetables will therefore help to keep your hormones in a healthy balance.

In fact, balancing your hormones through diet and lifestyle can benefit women at any age.

“If you’re prone to the psychological effects of PMS — mood swings and irritability — chances are it’s going to get much worse in your later years,” says Lynch. “If you’re already following a hormone balancing diet, then you’ll be in better shape by the time you get to perimenopause.”

Period pain (dysmenorrhoea) is also something that most women experience at some stage. At the start of a period, the natural contractions in the womb become more pronounced. The muscular wall of the womb starts to contract more vigorously, in order to squeeze out the blood that has built up on the lining of the womb. During perimenopause in particular, however, the erratic nature of ovulation can lead to a build-up of oestrogen, which may thicken the lining of the womb. The thicker the lining, the more severe your contractions are going to be. Painful periods can also be due to a build-up of inflammatory prostaglandins; the

WHAT IS EARLY MENOPAUSE?

Menopause might seem years into the future, but for some the process begins much earlier than expected.

The NHS defines early menopause as when a woman’s period stops “before the age of 45”.⁵ This can be induced by medical treatments such as a hysterectomy (the removal of the womb) or chemotherapy, as well as an autoimmune disease.

Food writer and journalist Sally Walker was 35 when she experienced her first symptoms. “It was a big shock,” she says. “I thought something was seriously wrong and locked myself away. I just felt so awful and had so many symptoms.” Now 44, she chooses to manage her symptoms through “natural supplements and good healthy eating”, but she recalls experiencing heavy periods lasting 12 weeks, as well as hot flushes, tiredness and mood swings.

“I think with my generation you are just told it’s something you have to go through and get on with it,” she adds. “More information is desperately needed.”

hormone-like substances that make the muscle layer contract further, increasing pain.

Regardless of whether you are going through menopause, focusing on a diet that reduces the build-up of inflammatory prostaglandins can help to reduce cramping and pain. This includes reducing your consumption of pro-inflammatory, ultra-processed foods and sugar, and increasing your intake of omega-3 fatty acids from fish, nuts and seeds, as well as wholegrains, fruits and vegetables.

Starting the conversation

Speaking to women who are going through or have gone through menopause can also form an important part of the preparation process.

"I think women have two issues," says Lynch. "First of all [the menopause] is private stuff and marks the end of your fertile years; a lot of women take that very badly.

"There's also the fact that women spend most of their professional life hiding what is going on with their reproductive status; either hiding the fact that they're pregnant because

PHYTOESTROGEN FOOD HEROES

Phytoestrogens are plant compounds that bind to oestrogen receptors in the body. Studies have shown that they may help to reduce menopausal symptoms such as night sweats and hot flushes by mimicking the role of oestrogen. The following sources are considered to be particularly helpful, although caution is recommended for those on blood thinners, diabetic medication or HRT.

- Linseed, flax and hemp seed (also an excellent source of fibre and omega-3, sprinkle these onto salads, smoothies and yoghurts). Soya protein (the best source of phytoestrogen, choose from soya beans, edamame, tempeh, miso, natto and tofu). Bioflavonoids (found in many herbs and fruits, such as blueberries, cherries, cranberries and red clover).

perhaps they don't want to miss out on a promotion, or at a later stage they don't want to mention the fact that they can't remember stuff as well or they're feeling anxious and can't hold that meeting."

She welcomes the fact that fewer women are "suffering in silence", with an increasing number of celebrities speaking out about their experiences. Closer to home, she adds that whilst women can't guarantee they'll have the same experience as their mother, "it is well worth asking what went on for her" too. Ultimately, we may not be able to eat our way to an easier menopause, but

if women of any age can benefit from a hormone balancing diet, it can't do any harm to lay the foundations. And if we are to face several years of night sweats and mood swings, the least we can do is open up the conversation about menopause and dismantle the stigma, so that future generations don't find themselves going into it blindly.

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