Although sex hormones naturally begin to decline in your 40s, there’s loads you can do to stay healthy, happy and well with our expert advice.

OUR BODIES change in many ways as we get older, and menopause is one such change that either has happened or is on the horizon for us all. The experience of the menopause, however, is different from woman to woman, with some sailing through it while around eight in ten experience symptoms.

Thankfully, discussions about the menopause are now much more out in the open, with well-known women such as Kirsty Wark and Carol Vorderman publicly speaking about their experiences. It’s a very natural process, but not always a straightforward one, so hearing how other women have managed their symptoms can be hugely helpful.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE ‘It’s also a potentially liberating time of life and a point when making changes to your diet, activity levels and lifestyle habits really does make a difference to your health,’ says Dr Louise Newson, who runs menopause clinics at Spire Parkway Hospital in Solihull. So, here’s what to expect and the natural ways that you can help yourself stay fit, healthy and happy when approaching menopause and beyond...

This is the time leading up to menopause and lasts, on average, four years (although in 10 per cent of women, periods can stop abruptly). The average age for women to actually reach menopause (your final period) is 51, so peri-menopause tends to happen in the second half of your 40s into your early 50s.

‘There is a complex system of signals between the brain and the ovaries that stimulates the release of reproductive hormones and ovulation each month,’ says Dr Heather Currie, chairwoman of the British Menopause Society. ‘During peri-menopause, your ovaries start to wind down production, become less responsive to the signals sent by the pituitary gland in the brain that stimulate ovulation, and produce less oestrogen.’ But this doesn’t happen in a linear way, which means that hormone levels can fluctuate.

‘Oestrogen, progesterone and testosterone are all in decline, but oestrogen can fluctuate up and down,’ says Dr Newson. ‘This can lead to irregular periods and/or a change, such as them being heavier/lighter or longer/shorter. It also causes other symptoms such as hot flushes, night sweats, low mood, disturbed sleep, loss of libido, memory problems and aching joints.’

But, there are changes you can make to help you stay happy and healthy, and ease the symptoms.
A survey by the British Menopause Society showed that 50 per cent of women hadn't consulted a health professional during menopause. GPs can talk you through HRT - it carries some risks, but it's suitable for most women and can dramatically improve symptoms by topping up the low hormone levels. They can also refer you for cognitive behavioural therapy for stress relief or recommend lifestyle changes.

Menopause Explained

Many people use the umbrella term ‘menopause’ to refer to what is actually a series of events...

- **Peri-menopause** This is where your periods may become irregular, with long gaps between them and you start to experience menopausal symptoms, such as hot flushes and night sweats.
- **Menopause** The date of your final period. Defined once you haven't had a period for 12 months.
- **Post-menopause** The years following your last period. Symptoms such as hot flushes may carry on (the average is four years) while your body adjusts to low levels of oestrogen.

TRIMMING DOWN

Research shows that excess weight, especially around the middle, makes hot flushes more severe. Scientists think this is because fat insulates you. Here are our top tips...

- **Be part of the resistance.** You can boost your basal metabolic rate (BMR) by increasing muscle mass. Resistance training either using weights or your own bodyweight, such as squats, step-ups, lunges and tricep dips, is fantastic to build muscle. Try to do them 3-4 times a week for 12-20 minutes.
- **Include cardio.** Exercise that raises your heart rate is essential for burning fat and calories. It also help alleviate hot flushes,' says Dr Rosemary Leonard, author of Menopause: The Answers (Union Spring, £14.99).
CONSIDER HERBS
If you can’t or have decided not to take HRT, you could look at herbal remedies, although the jury is out on their effectiveness simply because their long-term effects aren’t yet known. ‘The important thing to note is that they are not necessarily safer than HRT and you must choose a product that has the Traditional Herbal Registration (THR) logo awarded by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA),’ says Dr Leonard. ‘Talk to a pharmacist about possible side effects and interactions with other medications. And give things time to work – I would recommend about three months.’ The three most popular herbs used for menopause are black cohosh, St John’s wort and red clover. NICE guidelines state that there is some evidence that black cohosh or isoflavones (such as red clover) may relieve vasomotor symptoms – hot flushes and night sweats – but cautions on choice of preparation and interactions with other drugs. NICE says St John’s wort may be of benefit in the relief of these symptoms, but there is uncertainty about appropriate doses, how long the effects last and that there are serious interactions with other drugs such as tamoxifen.

SLEEP SOLUTIONS
‘Creating a cool environment can really help with managing night sweats,’ says Dr Leonard. ‘Have a window open, swap your duvet for a lower tog or a sheet – if you have a partner, consider two single duvets – and make sure all your bedding and nightwear is 100 per cent cotton as this will help to keep you cooler.’
As well as adopting a healthy, balanced diet and eliminating processed foods, here are a few other changes as recommended by Rebecca McManamon, spokesperson for the British Dietetic Association...

**Balance blood sugar.** At a time when your mood and energy levels may be affected, it’s important to avoid spikes in blood glucose that can result in energy slumps. Limit sugary treats and focus on foods that release their energy slowly, such as oats and wholegrains.

**Try phytoestrogens.** Research results are mixed, but studies show that foods containing plant chemicals called phytoestrogens may have a moderate effect on hot flushes. In populations such as that in Japan, hot flushes are much less common and it may be because of their high dietary intake of phytoestrogens. Try adding them to your diet [see p52 for examples]. Give it time to work – studies have seen effects in as little as a month, but it can take longer.
Menopause is your final period, but that can't be confirmed until you haven't had a period for a further 12 months. 'The levels of oestrogen in your body are now very low as the ovaries have ceased production, but your adrenal glands and fat cells still produce small amounts,' says Dr Newson.

But even after your periods have stopped, 'symptoms can continue for up to four years and it can be longer for some women,' she says. "Your body is still adjusting to the now very low levels of oestrogen.' Other health issues associated with low oestrogen also come to the fore now.

HEART CARE

'Your risk of heart disease goes up significantly after menopause," says Dr Newson. 'Oestrogen protects the lining of your blood vessels, keeping them clear and free of fatty deposits. When you lose this protection, it becomes even more important to lead a healthy lifestyle that includes cardiovascular exercise and a well-balanced diet.'

Bone health also becomes more important. 'There is a rapid loss of bone density in the first few years after menopause," says Dr Currie. 'As oestrogen declines, bone breakdown overtakes the building of new bone, and this can lead to osteoporosis.'

You may also feel changes in your vagina and bladder. 'What are known as the intermediate effects of low oestrogen often kick in a few years after your last period," says Dr Currie. 'These include urinary symptoms, such as increased frequency, incontinence and repeated urinary tract infections, and vaginal symptoms can include dryness, irritation and pain during sex.'

But the good news is that there's plenty you can do to lessen these risks and symptoms. 'Menopause can be seen as a great time to review your diet and lifestyle,' says Dr Currie. Here's what to do...
Stocking up on fruit and veg and cutting out processed foods can help keep you healthy as your body changes.

**INCREASE MINERALS**

'Calcium needs increase after menopause to help maintain bone health,' says Rebecca. 'It's better to get this from food rather than supplements. Dairy is the best source, so aim for four portions a day. The other three key nutrients for bone health are vitamin D (essential for calcium absorption), magnesium and phosphorus. Sunlight on your skin is the best way to make vitamin D, but I'd recommend post-menopausal women take a daily 1,000iu supplement. Magnesium can be found in green, leafy veg and phosphorus in dairy, wholegrain and pulses.'
If you weren't that into exercise before menopause, changing that now will be hugely positive. A recent Danish study found that post-menopausal women who took up exercise saw an even greater improvement in blood vessel function than the pre-menopausal women in the study. 'We think it's beneficial to start training after menopause to counteract its physiological changes,' says Ylva Hellsten, Professor of Cardiovascular and Exercise Physiology at the University of Copenhagen. 'Exercise can counter many aspects of low oestrogen and ageing.'

Cardio exercise continues to be important for weight regulation and warding off heart disease, as well as easing menopausal symptoms. Strength exercises are also a must. 'Women lose muscle mass after menopause. The estimates are that we lose six per cent per decade after 30 and that accelerates after menopause. So resistance training to maintain it is essential,' says Professor Hellsten. 'Muscle not only keeps you functioning well physically, it is also very important for maintaining stable glucose levels in the blood. It's worth eating some protein within two hours of strength training to help build muscle.'

Weight-bearing exercise i.e. anything that involves being on your feet – such as racket sports, walking or running – is great as it helps ward off a risk of osteoporosis. As you enter your 60s, keep exercising and following all of the above advice. 'There is no age limit for exercise,' says Professor Hellsten, 'although make sure you do several different types to lower the risk of injury.'

STAY ‘WELL-OILED’
'Topical oestrogen applied locally can be effective for vaginal symptoms and doesn’t carry the same risks as HRT,' says Dr Leonard. 'You can apply vaginal moisturising agents daily such as Replens. Using an oil based lubricant during sex will have a longer-lasting effect than water based ones, but they’re not condom compatible.'
Q WHAT ARE SOYA ISOFLAVONES?
These compounds, which come from soy-based foods, are a type of phytoestrogen, which naturally occur in certain plants. They are similar in chemical structure and function to oestrogen, a key female sex hormone.

Q HOW DO THEY SUPPORT MENOPAUSE?
"A large number of menopausal symptoms are due to the fall in the level of oestrogen, as your body adjusts to your menstrual cycle ending," says Alison Cullen, education manager and nutritional therapist at A.Vogel. "By gently supporting oestrogen levels with phytoestrogens, it helps with hot flushes, aches, low mood and low libido. And because they're plant-sourced, phytoestrogens don't carry side effects. Plus, they reach oestrogen receptors everywhere in the body, rather than targeting specific ones, unlike some less natural options," says Alison.

Q WILL THEY BOOST MY MOOD?
"The receptors are situated in areas that regulate attention span, memory, problem solving and planning, as well as areas that control certain emotions such as fear, pleasure and sexuality," says Alison. Soya isoflavones stimulate these receptor sites, therefore improving all of the above.

Q DO THEY SUPPORT BONE HEALTH?
"As oestrogen levels fall, phytoestrogens can ease many menopause symptoms. The receptors are situated in areas that regulate attention span, memory, problem solving and planning, as well as areas that control certain emotions such as fear, pleasure and sexuality," says Alison. Soya isoflavones stimulate these receptor sites, therefore improving all of the above.

"Women who topped up on soya isoflavones regularly showed a 54 per cent increase in bone mineral density, according to a study by China's Sichuan University.

Q DO THEY MAKE MY HEART HEALTHIER?
Falling oestrogen levels can also contribute to heart palpitations and an increased risk of heart disease, but soya isoflavones help combat this. What's more — particularly when combined with regular exercise — soy has been shown to lower cholesterol levels and improve endothelial function, which is the lining of your cells and veins. This means healthier blood vessels and better circulation.
Tuck into Isoflavones

Make sure you're getting quality nutrition with our natural and healthy suggestions.

Fill up on Fermented Soy: The best sources of soya isoﬂavones are those that have already been fermented from the soybean plant. Many traditional Eastern foods are made from fermented soya, such as tamari, miso, tempeh and natto. There are also plenty of soy dairy alternatives and products such as tofu and soy sauce readily available, but check the label first to ensure they’re fermented.

Optimise your Digestion

“You need active, healthy gut flora to convert phytoestrogens from food into hormones your body can use,” says Alison. This is particularly important as your digestive system can become sluggish during menopause. So top up on probiotics or foods such as natural yoghurt, blue cheese, or unprocessed sauerkraut.

Power Up with Plants

As well as soya isoﬂavones, there are other phytoestrogenic foods including leafy greens, wholegrains, pulses, and seeds. Chia and flaxseeds, also known as linseeds, keep your hormones happy as they contain lignans, which can balance your oestrogen levels.

TopSante Promotion

You need no more than 50mg daily of fermented soya isoﬂavones to beneﬁt. Try a herbal dietary supplement such as A Vogel Menopause Support (£14.99, avogel.co.uk), a formulation of isoﬂavones from fermented soya, and magnesium. Call 0845 608 5858 for more information.