

Menopause special THE INVISIBLE SYMPTOMS

Tired? Irritable? You might be menopausal - even if you think you're too young, or passed that stage years ago, says Anna Harper



When people are asked what the symptoms of the menopause, are, most will say hot flushes and night sweats,' says Dr Louise Newson, a GP and menopause expert in Solihull in the West Midlands. 'Yes, they are common - three out of four women suffer from them, but it's the other symptoms that people don't understand and don't talk about. Those are the ones that can be the most challenging.'

These invisible symptoms - which include low mood, exhaustion and migraines - can be devastating for women, but only when they are ignored and allowed to get out of control. The difficulty is that so many women attribute them to other things: stress at work, juggling a job and children, or looking after elderly parents. Often, they push on through. They wouldn't dream of troubling a doctor.

A woman is formally defined as menopausal when it has been a year since her last period. However, symptoms often develop during the perimenopause, the time leading up to this point. The average age of the menopause in the UK is 51, but hot flushes, exhaustion, low mood and migraines can begin years before, caused by changing hormones. They can also last for years afterwards, especially if left untreated.

If women have low self-esteem during the menopause, or their concentration drops at work, their relationships and careers can suffer

in the long run. Dr Newson, who is in her mid-forties, knows from personal experience how easy it is to ignore symptoms and let them get out of hand. 'About nine months ago, I began getting really tired. After work, I felt like flopping into bed,' she says. 'But I have three children, which takes up a lot of energy, as well as a demanding job, so I ignored it.'

Dr Newson connected her exhaustion to the menopause only after a comment from her teenage daughter. 'I was telling her to go to bed and she said, "Mummy, all you do is shout! You're just like some of my friends before they have their period." I realised I may well be hormonal. I hadn't had a period in a

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couple of months. I thought, "That's it! I'm menopausal."

Dr Newson, who provides advice and information for anyone going through this phase in their life (or who suspects they know someone who is) at her website Menopause and Me (www.menopauseandme.co.uk), has seen dozens of patients in similar situations.

One woman came to her terrified that something was seriously wrong. She felt she had to write everything down in her consultation because she thought she had dementia (like her mother, who was in a care home). She was having heart palpitations, so she had been to a cardiologist for tests (her father had died of a heart

attack a couple of years before). She'd had migraines in the past, but they were getting worse, so she had seen a neurologist for an MRI scan. She had also had three urinary tract infections. And she was suffering from low mood (her brother had recently died). She had been offered

antidepressants quite a few times but, despite the emotional impact of her symptoms, she didn't think she was clinically depressed. 'When I put it all together, I realised she was probably menopausal. For her, just to know this was the case was a huge relief,' says Dr Newson.

The recognition that the menopause can affect women psychologically is fairly recent. 'Even 10 years ago, if someone was talking about the menopause, I'd just have said, "Put a fan in the room to help with your hot flushes and get on with it,"' admits Dr Newson. 'I had no idea about the psychological impact: the loss of self-esteem, the low mood, the

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'A lot of menopausal women tell their doctors "I know I'm not depressed" but are still given antidepressants'

depression, the anxiety.' Patients have come to her saying they can't do their jobs, they struggle to get out of the house, or they can't drive because they are so anxious. 'A lot of people tell me that they just come home from work and they put on their pyjamas and go to bed or veg in front of the telly,' she adds.

Of course, that doesn't mean that all women in their late forties and early fifties who feel run down or achy or forgetful are going through the menopause. But Dr Newson suspects it accounts for the way a lot of women feel at this age. 'Doctors are mislabelling the menopause and misdiagnosing people,' she says. 'In my clinic, about 70 per cent of women have been offered or been given antidepressants. A lot of these women say, "I know I'm not depressed," but they are still given antidepressants. They might have depressive symptoms - low mood and poor concentration - but that's not the same.'

Dr Newson encourages women to consider hormone replacement therapy, stressing that there are lots of types, and there are different doses, depending on your age and symptoms. She says her 79-year-old mother, who still works as a speech and drama examiner, takes it and wouldn't go without it. But it's not for everyone and it isn't a quick fix.

Post-menopausal women are at higher risk of osteoporosis and bone fractures due to low oestrogen levels

USEFUL CONTACTS

A.Vogel

◆ 0845-608 5858, www.avogel.co.uk

Nurture

◆ 0800-072 9510, www.healthspan.co.uk/nurture-skincare

Omega7

◆ 0800-591756, www.omega7.co.uk

OptiBac Probiotics

◆ 01264-363193,
www.optibacprobiotics.co.uk

Eating a balanced diet and taking regular exercise are important for your overall health, and calcium and vitamin D supplements are often recommended for strong bones. Probiotics have been known to help some women suffering from urinary tract infections and dryness. Some women also swear by yoga and herbal remedies.

Alongside this, Dr Newson wants women to be able to talk to their partners, children and parents about their symptoms. 'People are reluctant to talk to each other about the menopause, partly because they think it's a sign they're getting old, partly because they're embarrassed and partly because they don't know that there is help out there,' she says. 'I see people who have had symptoms for years - sometimes even more than a decade - who haven't done anything about it, or they've tried to do something about it but they haven't had the right advice.'

Even if you're past the hot flush stage, it's not too late to seek advice. ◆ Dr Louise Newson is a GP and runs a menopause clinic at Spire Parkway Hospital in Solihull, West Midlands.