

Patient information factsheet

Alternatives to HRT for symptoms of the menopause

If you're unable to take hormone replacement therapy (HRT) or you decide not to, you may want to consider alternative ways of controlling your menopausal symptoms.

This factsheet contains some non-hormonal alternatives and lifestyle changes you can try to help manage your menopausal symptoms. We hope this factsheet will help to answer some of the questions you may have. If you have any further questions or concerns, please speak to a member of our team.

What is the menopause?

The menopause is when a woman stops having periods and is no longer able to get pregnant naturally. The menopause is a natural part of ageing that usually occurs between 45 and 55 years of age, as a woman's oestrogen levels decline. In the UK, the average age for a woman to reach the menopause is 51.

What are the symptoms of menopause?

Common menopausal symptoms include:

- hot flushes and night sweats
- insomnia (problems sleeping) - particularly waking early and difficulty getting back to sleep
- low mood and mood changes
- loss of sex drive (libido)
- vaginal dryness
- pain during sex

The duration and the severity of symptoms will vary for each woman.

What is hormone replacement therapy (HRT)?

The main treatment for menopausal symptoms is hormone replacement therapy (HRT). HRT involves taking hormones to replace the decline in your body's own levels around the time of the menopause.

You may not be able to use HRT for several reasons. For example, if you have:

- a history of breast cancer (it can increase your risk of the cancer returning or a new cancer developing)
- heart disease
- had a previous clotting event
- had a stroke
- had unexplained vaginal bleeding
- a history of high-risk cancer of the womb
- active liver disease

Lifestyle changes

Avoid potential triggers

Some women find that things such as spicy foods, caffeine (for example, in tea, coffee and cola), smoking and alcohol can trigger hot flushes. Avoiding these triggers may help improve your menopausal symptoms and help you to sleep better.

Keep cool

You can help reduce the intensity of hot flushes by:

- keeping the room cool with a fan
- wearing layers of clothing that you can take off
- wearing clothing made of natural fabrics (for example, cotton)

Exercise regularly

Regular physical activity, such as walking, can help improve fatigue (extreme tiredness). It may feel difficult at first, but it will get easier the more you exercise. Weight bearing exercises and a diet or supplements containing calcium and vitamin D will help you to look after your bones.

Maintain a healthy weight

Women with a higher body mass index (BMI) tend to have more severe menopausal symptoms. Maintaining a healthy weight can help to reduce your symptoms.

Take herbal and dietary supplements

There are several herbal and dietary supplements available to help with menopausal symptoms. Before taking any new supplements, it is important that you speak to your GP or a pharmacist, as some supplements can interact with other medicines.

If you have a history of breast cancer, you should not take any supplements containing oestrogen.

Behavioural therapies

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is a talking therapy that can help you manage your problems by changing the way you think and behave. It's most commonly used to treat anxiety and depression, but it has also been shown to improve menopausal symptoms, such as:

- mood changes
- problems sleeping
- hot flushes
- night sweats

CBT is available as a written guide, an online programme, and as telephone or face-to-face sessions with a therapist. You can get CBT on the NHS. You can either ask your GP to refer you for CBT, or you can refer yourself directly to an NHS psychological therapies service without a referral from a GP. The 'CBT Register UK' allows you to search for a therapist in your local area: www.cbtregisteruk.com

Hypnosis

Hypnosis has been shown to significantly reduce hot flushes and night sweats by 74% after 12 hour-long weekly sessions.

Sexual therapy

Pain during sex is common after the menopause as oestrogen levels fall which can cause the vagina to feel dry. This pain can affect a woman's desire for sex. Sexual therapy can help with this. Talk with your partner about your problem, and see a therapist together if you can. Do not be embarrassed. Many people experience sexual dysfunction and there are ways to get help. Your GP can refer you to a therapist.

Non-hormonal prescribed treatments

There are several non-hormonal alternatives available for the control of menopausal symptoms. However, none of the alternatives are as effective as HRT. Your GP or menopause specialist may prescribe you one or more of the non-hormonal alternatives below:

- Clonidine
- antidepressants
- Gabapentin and Pregabalin
- Oxybutynin

Most non-hormonal treatments act quickly. If you don't notice an improvement after two to four weeks of using the treatment, you may need to try a different treatment.

Vaginal oestrogen

Vaginal oestrogen can help to ease some of your menopausal symptoms, such as vaginal dryness, pain during sex and may prevent recurrent urine infections. Vaginal oestrogen is available as:

- a cream you apply to your vagina
- a tablet you insert into your vagina
- an oestrogen-releasing vaginal ring

The safety of vaginal oestrogen after having breast cancer is uncertain. Your cancer and menopause specialists will decide whether HRT is suitable for you based on the severity of your menopausal symptoms.

Non-hormonal topical treatments

A topical treatment is something that is applied directly to the skin or body surface, such as a cream. The topical treatments listed below can help to ease vaginal dryness and pain:

Vaginal moisturisers

These provide moisture and work like a body lotion. They help to improve the symptoms of vaginal dryness and can be re-applied every couple of days.

Vaginal lubricants

Some women only notice vaginal dryness when they have sex. Placing a small dose of lubricant inside the vagina before having sex will usually help with this.

Vulval lidocaine gel (4 or 5%)

This is an anaesthetic gel that numbs the vaginal opening to help ease pain and discomfort when having sex.

You can buy many of these topical treatments over the counter at your local pharmacy. However, some treatments are only available on prescription, such as vaginal oestrogen. Please speak to your GP for advice.

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Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact us.

Menopause team secretary

Telephone: **023 8120 6041**

Useful links

Sleepio (a digital platform providing a clinically proven six-week programme to help with sleep disturbances)

Website: **www.sleepio.com**

Menopause Matters

Website: **www.menopausematters.co.uk**

The Daisy Network

Website: **www.daisynetwork.org**

Cancer Research UK

Website: **www.cancerresearchuk.org**

NHS UK

Website: **www.nhs.uk/conditions/menopause/treatment**

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