

# The Facts About Menopause

## What is Menopause?

- **Menopause** is when a woman stops having her periods. It occurs in all women as their bodies age and their ovaries stop working and producing estrogen (a hormone).
- **Natural menopause** happens gradually and is signaled by altered menstrual periods and other symptoms.
- **Artificial menopause** occurs when a woman has her ovaries removed by surgery (oophorectomy, often along with a hysterectomy), or the ovaries are damaged by radiation (for cancer).

## What are the Symptoms?

- **Hot flashes** occur in 75% of all women. Typically, the skin of the chest, head, and neck suddenly become red and warm, lasting from a few seconds to several minutes. Chills and sweats may follow this. They can occur several times a day and can interfere with sleep. Sometimes, headaches, nausea, and difficulty concentrating can accompany them.
- **Irregular bleeding** usually begins with decreased flow and missed periods, eventually leading to no periods.
- **Emotional problems** such as mood swings, irritability, and depression can also result from the decreased levels of estrogen.
- **Vaginal symptoms** such as itching, dryness, and thinning of the skin can lead to discomfort with sexual intercourse as well as more frequent vaginal bladder infections.

## What about the Health Risks?

- **Estrogen** has many beneficial effects on a woman's health and after its absence, menopause can lead to certain health risks.
- **Osteoporosis**, or brittle bones, occurs as the body's cycle of growing and losing bone changes. As we change, bone loss starts to exceed bone growth. Bones become more fragile and break more easily. This bone loss speeds up for the first several years after natural menopause. There are lots of other risk factors for developing osteoporosis, which your doctor can share with you.
- **Heart disease** is the leading cause of illness and death in post-menopausal women. Estrogen acts to decrease bad cholesterol and increase good cholesterol. Before menopause, the risk of heart attacks in women is much lower than in men. After menopause, estrogen is not being produced and the risk of heart attacks in women

increases to equal the risk in men. Again, many other risk factors can lead to heart disease too. Please talk with your doctor.

### **What can be done?**

- A healthy diet rich in **calcium** plays an important role in preventing osteoporosis. Talk with your doctor or a nutritionist to find out how much calcium is enough for you.
- **Exercise** helps decrease your risk of heart disease and osteoporosis. It helps to slow the loss of bone mass. Low-impact exercise, such as walking, is strongly encouraged in all women.
- **Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT)** involves taking hormones (like estrogen and sometimes progesterone) to imitate the body's natural production of hormones. HRT can help relieve some of the symptoms of menopause, as well as protect the body against osteoporosis and heart disease. Some women should not take estrogen. Discuss HRT with your doctor to see if it is right for you.