

Menopause 10 Questions men should be asking

1. Isn't menopause a woman's issue – should men be muscling in on it?

An estimated 13 million women in the UK are now experiencing menopausal symptoms – and among them is likely to be your wife, sister, boss, mam, friend. A woman's quality of life can be significantly affected by the symptoms, which undoubtedly mean yours will too. A quarter of women say their relationships have been affected. 1 in 10 have seriously considered giving work up completely. 25% of women want to reduce their working hours because of their symptoms. This will obviously have a knock-on effect for everyone. Menopause is also seen as one of the last taboos. Having a supportive partner can help a woman through this time more seamlessly. Demystifying the subject helps everyone.

2. What exactly is the menopause?

All women experience the menopause differently and there is no 'one size fits all' set of symptoms or solutions. Officially it is defined as when a woman's periods have stopped for a full 12 months and she is no longer able to get pregnant. This happens when her ovaries stop producing eggs and levels of hormones – particularly oestrogen – begin to fluctuate and fall. As these hormones become more erratic, this leads to typical symptoms of perimenopause (the time leading up to the menopause, which lasts on average 3 to 4 years but can be longer) until her periods stop completely. On average, women hit the menopause at 51 or 52 but it can happen anywhere between the ages of 45 and 55. It is not a disease or an illness – it is a completely natural time in a woman's life, but symptoms like hot flushes, interrupted sleep, tiredness, anxiety, memory problems, mood swings and low self-esteem can leave her feeling vulnerable and struggling.

3. How do you know when your partner/sister/mother/colleague is going through it?

Even experienced health professionals who work with menopausal women often don't recognise the symptoms themselves, so it is not easy. It is also complicated by the fact some women breeze through with no symptoms, around 80% experience some and a small percentage have such debilitating symptoms they find it difficult to function. This is not helped when things like achy joints, tiredness and brain fog can also be simply chalked up to signs of ageing. Some women can also be reluctant to talk about their symptoms – feeling they will be conclusive evidence they are old and dispensable – and to admit it at work can make them seem weak. What you can do is familiarise your-self with as much available information as possible so you are better placed to emphasise and help.

4. So, what should I look out for?

There is no neat set of symptoms you can tick off, but if your partner is spending the nights flinging the duvet off and opening the window in the middle of winter, this is probably a giveaway. The psychological symptoms, however like forgetfulness, anxiety, loss of confidence and identity are less visible but can be more disconcerting. Be alert to changes which seem out of character – is she biting your head off unnecessarily, bursting into tears often, talking about feeling hopeless without any seeming reason? Is that strong, sharp, capable woman in your life increasingly doubting herself and getting upset and forgetful?

5. I can't do a thing right, how do I cope with her mood swings?

Many men describe feeling like they are walking on eggshells around the menopausal woman in their life, and it can be a testing time for any relationship. Don't take things personally: the anxiety, brain fog and sleep disruption associated with the menopause may be causing some out-of-character behaviour like short temper and mood swings. But once symptoms are under control, she'll be back to herself.

6. Should I suggest she starts taking HRT?

The Government's National Institute for Health Care (NICE) and the British Menopause Society (thebms.org.uk) say this is statistically the most effective treatment for menopausal symptoms. Many women rave about how it makes them feel like 'themselves' again. On the other hand, many manage their symptoms well with lifestyle changes like a balanced diet,

regular exercise, sleep and an herbal supplement. So, it is her decision how she approaches it. Just support her in whichever she decides.

7. **Realistically how can a man help?**

Do your research, find information about the menopause yourself as it can be hard for someone struggling with symptoms to explain everything. When discussing it, be mindful to communicate with compassion as women sometimes feel they are at fault for not coping well enough. This will help solidify your relationship and allow it to evolve into its next phase. All the experts say women who eat well and exercise are more likely to have an easier menopause, so suggest you both try to get healthier. Exercise together, eat nutritious food and try to cut down on alcohol.

8. **Does the menopause mean the end of our sex life?**

A small number of women find their libido increases, but most find the reverse. It is helpful to understand this is the result of her hormones and be aware of how the dip in oestrogen is likely making her feel tired, sweaty, possibly with tender breasts and a drier vagina that can make it harder to become aroused or orgasm. Many women also find they start to carry extra weight around the middle so they may not want to be seen naked. Hard as it is being on the receiving end of sexual rejection, the likelihood is she feels just as conflicted about her lack of interest and enjoyment as you do. Don't pester her into having sex, be patient, this is a transitional phase.

9. **What should a man defiantly not say or do?**

Never and we mean never, say 'oh it must be your hormones' or 'go and take a chill pill'. These comments will just rile her. Ditto any mention of being dried up, hysterical or mad. Referencing weight gain is probably best avoided, as is mansplaining the menopause or pointing out that your mother didn't behave like this. A bit of humour can go a long way to help challenging conversations but take your cue from her. Be patient, it can take time for a woman to find treatments and strategies to manage her symptoms and navigate her way through the menopause maze.

10. **Is there anything I can buy for her, to make her feel better?**

You could invest in a fan for the bedroom and possibly a duvet each, so if she wants to fling hers off in the night, you are not left out in the cold. Some good quality essential oils could also prove useful. Inhaling lavender essential oil twice a day over 12 weeks reduces hot flushes. While geranium oil may help alleviate anxiety in menopausal women. Post-menopausal women who use neroli essential oil have an increase in sexual desire.