Menopause and HIV

Last updated: August 20, 2021

Together, we can change the course of the HIV epidemic...one woman at a time.

#onewomanatatime

#thewellproject

www.thewellproject.org
What Is Menopause?

Menopause: Point in time when *a woman's menstrual periods have stopped*

- Often called "change of life"
- Menopause is a normal part of a woman's life

www.thewellproject.org
What Is Menopause?

- **Perimenopause**: time of transition leading up to a woman's final menstrual period
- Women usually experience menopause between ages of 38 and 58; average age is 51
- Some evidence that women living with HIV may experience menopause earlier
- Symptoms may be more intense for women living with HIV, but no definitive proof of this

www.thewellproject.org
What Is Menopause?

• **Changes of menopause begin** when:
  – Ovaries (female reproductive organs containing eggs) naturally begin to slow down making estrogen and progesterone (female sex hormones)

• When women **near menopause**:  
  – Estrogen levels drop  
  – Stop having regular cycles  
  – Eventually can no longer get pregnant

• Women have **passed through menopause** when:
  – Body has completed these changes (one to several years)  
  – Has not had period for 12 months in a row
During perimenopause, hormone levels rise and fall unevenly. Women may experience:

- Increasingly irregular periods
  - Change in frequency, duration, amount
- Hot flashes, night sweats
- Mood swings
- Depression
- Irritability
- Vaginal dryness
- Forgetfulness
- Trouble sleeping, fatigue
- Lack of sexual desire
- Skin changes including:
  - Thinner skin
  - Wrinkling
  - Acne
Symptoms and Conditions Related to Menopause

- Women living with HIV who experience sweats at night
  - May be *misdiagnosed as having menopause-related hot flashes*
  - Their sweats may be result of HIV
- Vaginal dryness can be mistaken for a yeast infection
- Keep track of menstrual cycles
  - Report any changes to health care provider
  - Can avoid wrong diagnosis or hormonal treatments that may not be necessary

www.thewellproject.org
Symptoms and Conditions Related to Menopause

- Women living with HIV *may experience menstrual cycle changes* even if not going through menopause
  - Speak to health care provider if you have any symptoms described above
  - Find out if related to HIV, menopause, or both
  - May be helpful to have hormone levels checked

- **Medical concerns** that can develop after menopause:
  - Osteoporosis (bone loss)
  - Cardiovascular (heart) disease
  - Urinary incontinence (leaking, more frequent urination)
Replacing estrogen a woman’s body no longer makes can relieve symptoms of menopause

• Women who have a uterus usually take estrogen with progesterone (hormone replacement therapy, HRT)
  – Used to be recommended, but long-term use now questioned; research shows increased cancer risk
  – May be appropriate for a short time
  – Patches, creams, vaginal rings may not carry same risk

• Women who had uterus removed can take estrogen by itself (estrogen replacement therapy, ERT)
Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT)

• Talk to provider about HRT
  – Provider needs to know *all* drugs and treatments you take, including over-the-counter and street drugs, herbs, etc.

• **HIV drugs can reduce effectiveness of hormones**
  – Includes birth control pills with estrogen and progesterone

• Estrogen can also cause lower levels of HIV drugs
  – Risk for rising viral load, HIV drug resistance

• Women living with HIV and taking HIV drugs have *good results using birth control pills and other hormonal contraceptives*
Alternative Treatments

• Complementary/alternative therapies for menopausal symptoms:
  – Traditional Chinese Medicine (e.g., acupuncture, Chinese herbs)
  – Eating foods that contain plant-based estrogens (also called phytoestrogens; e.g., soy, flax seeds)
  – Herbal or botanical supplements (e.g., dong quai, kava, ginseng, black cohosh, red clover, etc.)
  – Antidepressant drugs and/or counseling
  – Mindfulness training

• Some may have unwanted side effects or interact with HIV drugs
  – Often not regulated by U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)
  – Not required to prove effectiveness in the same way as standard therapies

• Consult skilled practitioner and let regular provider know what you are doing

www.thewellproject.org
Keeping Healthy After Menopause

• Eat a healthy diet
• Have bone health checked; ask provider about specific treatment to prevent bone loss:
  – Calcium supplements
    • FDA recommends women over 50 take \( \geq 1,200 \text{ mg calcium/day} \)
    • Calcium supplements may interfere with certain HIV drugs
    • Speak to your provider before taking them
  – Prescription drugs to prevent bone loss
• Have vitamin D level checked; take supplements as instructed by provider
• Quit or try to cut down on smoking

www.thewellproject.org
Keeping Healthy after Menopause

• Use alcohol moderately (no more than one drink per day)
• Be physically active:
  – Aerobic or cardiovascular activity for 30 minutes, 5x/week (brisk walking, etc.) can prevent cardiovascular disease
  – Muscle-strengthening activity 2x/week can prevent bone loss
• Mammogram every 1-2 years
• Pelvic exam as often as recommended
  – With cervical cancer screening test (for those with a uterus)
• Get your cholesterol, triglycerides checked regularly
Taking Care of Yourself

• Menopause may signal the end of a woman’s fertility, but *it is not the end of her femininity or sexuality*
  – Some women experience mild, tolerable symptoms
  – Others’ symptoms are severe; impact quality of life

• Decisions about treatment options are up to each woman
  – Discuss concerns, questions with provider to weigh risks and benefits
• To learn more, and for links to articles featuring more details, please read the full fact sheet:
  – Menopause and HIV

• For more fact sheets and to connect to our community of women living with HIV, visit:
  – www.thewellproject.org
  – www.facebook.com/thewellproject
  – www.twitter.com/thewellproject