

# Menopause and Your Risk for Heart Disease

## Menopause

Menopause is a natural process. It occurs when you stop having your monthly period for at least 12 months in a row (without being pregnant). This usually happens between the ages of 47 and 55.

During menopause, your ovaries no longer produce eggs and you cannot get pregnant. Until you have gone one full year without a period, you will still need to use birth control if you do not want to get pregnant.

Menopause can also happen if both ovaries are removed surgically. This is called surgical menopause.

You may start to feel menopause signs months or years before it starts. This is called perimenopause and it lasts up to one year after your final period.

About 75 percent of women have some negative symptoms during menopause. These include:

- hot flashes
- night sweats
- changes in your period
- sleep problems
- mood changes
- memory or concentration problems
- fatigue
- reduced sex drive
- vaginal dryness
- bladder infections.

If you smoke, you are more likely to begin menopause earlier than someone who does not use tobacco.

## Hormone Changes

When your ovaries stop releasing eggs, they stop making the sex hormones estrogen and progesterone.

- Estrogen tells your brain to signal your ovaries to release an egg once a month. It makes your uterine lining (endometrium) thicker. Estrogen also helps prevent heart disease, helps prevent osteoporosis (weak, brittle bones) and helps relieve some symptoms of menopause.
- Progesterone helps control your monthly periods. The levels drop when you do not get pregnant. This signals your uterus to shed the lining (your period).

The lack of estrogen during menopause can lead to heart disease.

## Heart Disease

Heart disease is the No. 1 killer of women. It kills more women older than age 45 than breast cancer. In fact, heart disease kills more than half of women older than age 50.

There are different types of heart disease:

### ■ Coronary artery disease.

Plaque (fatty deposits) builds up in your arteries. This blocks the flow of blood to your heart. A totally blocked artery will cause a heart attack (myocardial infarction).

### ■ High blood pressure (hypertension).

This puts stress on your blood vessel walls. You may have high blood pressure and not even know it. You have high blood pressure if you usually have a top number of 130 or higher or a bottom number of 80 or higher. The top number is when your heart beats and the bottom number is when your heart rests.

If left untreated, high blood pressure can lead to heart attack, heart failure, stroke or kidney failure.

### ■ High total cholesterol.

Cholesterol is a fat-like substance made by your liver and found in the food you eat. Your total cholesterol includes three parts:

- LDL (low density lipoprotein) cholesterol. This is known as the “bad” cholesterol. When too much builds up on your artery walls, plaque forms.
- HDL (high density lipoprotein) cholesterol. This is known as the “good” cholesterol.
- triglycerides. This is fat digested from food released into your bloodstream. It either gives your body energy or is stored as fat.

Within 6 months of your last period, your cholesterol levels can go up more than 5 percent.

### ■ Peripheral artery disease (PAD).

Cholesterol and plaque (fatty deposits) collect on the insides of the walls your blood vessels. This most often occurs in your legs. If the fatty build-up keeps collecting, your blood flow will be reduced.

You may feel aches, pains, cramps, numbness or muscle fatigue when you exercise. These feelings may be caused by atherosclerosis, which interferes with blood flow to or from your blood vessels.

## Risk of Heart Disease

You may be at risk for heart disease if you:

- are older than age 50
- have had menopause (especially if early)
- smoke
- are overweight
- do not exercise
- have diabetes (high blood glucose)
- have high cholesterol
- have high blood pressure.

## How You Can Prevent Heart Disease

- Do not smoke. Smoking increases your risk of heart attack. Once you stop smoking, your heart attack risk goes down.
- Do cardiovascular exercise at least 3 to 5 times a week. Walking, jogging, biking or swimming keeps the blood flowing through your arteries.
- Watch your blood pressure.
- Eat a well-balanced diet and lose weight if you need to.

See your doctor if you are at risk for heart disease.

**Information was adapted from the National Institutes of Health and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.**