

Early or Premature Menopause and Emotional Wellbeing

Early menopause is when the final menstrual period occurs before the age of 45. *Premature menopause* is when the final menstrual period occurs before the age of 40 (see 'Early and Premature Menopause' fact sheet for more information). Early and Premature menopause can sometimes result in greater changes to mood and emotional wellbeing than menopause at midlife. Its impact on emotional health and wellbeing will depend on:

- other factors occurring at the same time
- the way diagnosis occurred– the time it took, how distressing it was, how it came about, how the diagnosis was communicated to you
- your individual symptoms and physical changes
- your ways of coping, your lifestyle, relationships, and support
- levels of self-esteem, your roles and sense of purpose in life
- earlier experience of problems with mood such as previous depression and/or anxiety

Common initial reactions to a diagnosis of early menopause may include shock, disbelief, numbness, sadness, fear, anxiety and determination. Longer term reactions may involve depression, anxiety, stress, a sense of loss of control, lower self-esteem, grief, or it may result in motivation to make changes, including lifestyle changes.

"I was diagnosed with premature menopause just after my 2nd birthday. Initially I was relieved to know what was wrong with me as I had suffered poor health, bad flushes, night sweats and on/off periods. Then I was told that I would never have my own children and that's when it hit home how serious it was."

Early menopause and mood

Early and premature menopause appears to increase the risk of having depression, anxiety and mood changes. This may be because of the sudden hormonal changes that often occur with an early menopause such as those caused by surgery or chemotherapy used in cancer treatment. The symptoms of menopause can also be more severe and unpredictable. Changes in mood may also result from the cause of the early menopause - e.g. cancer as well as all the other changes happening in a woman's life at the time. Every woman will deal with her diagnosis individually and over time but it is important to seek help and treatment for any long term changes in mood that results in depression and anxiety.

"Since menopause began my whole world has changed. I have no control of my mood, temper or emotions and I can not remember nor retain anything and I am so tired."

Early menopause, life stages, loss and grief

When menopause occurs earlier than at the expected age and stage of life, there can be a sense of loss and grief. This might be loss of control, ability to plan, and self-image. Women may be grieving and have no one to share their grief with; girlfriends or even mothers may not understand because they have not yet experienced menopause. Some women with early menopause talk of 'loss of womanhood', and 'loss of dreams' in their twenties and thirties with 50 to 60 years left of their life to live. It may take some time to diagnose an early menopause and not knowing what is wrong or what the future holds can be frightening.

"Being that I am only 35 – that I don't look old – makes it so much harder...I think that the hardest thing for me at this time in my life, is dealing with the fact that my friends are off having babies. Being in a totally different stage is so hard"

Early menopause and your role

Experiencing an early menopause may take away the possibility of becoming a mother for some women. Some say 'I wasn't sure if I even wanted children' or 'I didn't know if I wanted more children' but women often feel it is unfair when the decision is taken away from them. How this feels and the impact it has will depend on individual circumstances, support networks and coping skills. It is important to remember that women have many roles as partners, daughters,

sisters, friends, aunts, granddaughters, workers, neighbours, caregivers. Sometimes this doesn't feel enough. If the impact of early menopause on fertility is causing you distress, speak to your health professional.

"I decided that as soon I was diagnosed as going through an early menopause that I would investigate using donor eggs. I'll be damned if I'm going to miss out on being a mother."

"I felt lost when I realised that I could never have children, that the choice had been taken away from me. My partner and I are working through it. My life is so full in so many other ways."

Early menopause and relationships

The stresses and symptoms that can accompany early menopause may impact significantly on how a woman views herself and ultimately this can impact on relationships. It is important for partners to be aware of the physical and psychological changes and challenges of an early menopause. Some women who go through an early menopause are not yet in a committed relationship and this can provide another challenge. A counsellor can often help women and couples talk through the issues associated with an early menopause. It may also be helpful for partners to read information that explains the physical and emotional issues that may occur.

"How can I tell a future partner that I have already gone through menopause? I don't even know what to say when I have a hot flush during a date, let alone ask are children in his plans."

Early menopause and sex

The symptoms that come with an early menopause such as a dry, thin vagina can make sex painful. This can be distressing as the relationship may be new or sex may never have been an issue in the relationship before. It can be very frustrating and embarrassing for women to rely on lubricants, let alone try to explain what is going on to their partner. It is important for women to communicate openly with their partners and carefully explore all the management options available. Taking your partner to gynaecological or doctor appointments can be very helpful, as they can learn and understand more about the changes that you are experiencing.

Early menopause and body image

Early menopause can bring a big change to the way women view their bodies. Many women feel their *body* is out of their control; symptoms are frustrating, confusing and distressing and they feel less desirable and attractive. It is not surprising that women talk of not being able to trust their body and see their body in a more negative way. Hot flushes, dry skin, a dry vagina and increased risks of osteoporosis and heart disease are significant changes to experience during your twenties and thirties. It is important that all of these aspects are acknowledged and discussed if they are impacting negatively on you.

"I hate not being able to control these changes. I hate not knowing how my body is going to behave. I worry about osteoporosis down the track, what my skin will look like when I am 50 and taking HRT for so many years."

What to do?

The diagnosis of an early menopause can be devastating and bring many changes and challenges. Taking action and seeking help, can enable you to feel more informed, more in control, and assist you to cope with the changes and challenges of an early menopause. The following are some practical tips to help you manage your emotional wellbeing at this time:

- treat the physical symptoms of premature and early menopause
- discuss your mood and psychological wellbeing with your doctor. Medicare rebates are available for up to 10 visits per year to a Psychologist
- make changes that optimise your wellbeing
- seek accurate health information from reliable sources

****Prioritise what is most important to you and communicate this with your doctor****

Where can I find more information?

www.earlymenopause.org.au

www.managingmenopause.org.au

www.menopause.org.au – Australasian Menopause Society

www.beyondblue.org.au

www.psychology.org.au – Australian Psychological Society – to find a psychologist in your area

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This fact sheet is designed to be informative and educational. It is not intended to provide specific medical advice or replace advice from your health practitioner

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