



WOMEN'S SEXUAL CONCERNS

It is important to address women's issues regarding sexual health early on to avoid them from negatively affecting not only a woman's physical health, but also the quality of her intimate relationships.

MENOPAUSE

Menopause is a natural biological process in which a woman's menstrual period ends. This is caused by the decline in the production of two hormones, *estrogen* and *progesterone*. On the average, women experience this at the age of 51. However, menopause can happen any time between the ages of 40 and 60.

Perimenopause, the stage before menopause, may last four to five years, or more. It is during this phase that women experience the symptoms typically associated with menopause.

When a woman has stopped menstruating for over a year, she is considered *post-menopausal*. This means that her ovaries have stopped releasing eggs. Her body no longer produces enough progesterone and estrogen to induce menstruation.

Symptoms:

- Irregular periods (maybe lighter or heavier than usual)
- Hot flashes
- Night sweats; extreme sweating
- Insomnia
- Anxiety, mood changes, irritability or depression
- Changes in sexual desire
- Difficulty concentrating
- Poor memory
- Frequent urination
- Vaginal dryness
- Headaches
- Skin dryness
- Hair loss
- Bone loss or osteoporosis
- Palpitation

DO:

- Lead a healthy lifestyle even in younger years.
- Get regular exercise and drink plenty of water.
- To help ease symptoms like vaginal dryness, painful intercourse and hot flashes, consider *Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT)*, which provides a low dose of estrogen, usually combined with progestin. However, since there are some risks involved like gallstones, blood clots and increased risk of breast cancer, evaluate this decision carefully.
- Take Vitamin E to remedy hot flashes. Vitamin E is also a potent anti-oxidant which can help protect against heart disease, the number one killer of post-menopausal women.
- Include Vitamin C and B complex as diet supplements.
- Take Calcium supplements to combat osteoporosis. Low fat milk and yogurt, fortified juice and cereals, molasses, salmon and sardines with bones are good food sources of calcium.
- Take magnesium supplements for strong bones and a healthier heart. This mineral reduces blood pressure in women not taking other medication and helps in better calcium absorption by the body.
- Try natural sources of estrogen by taking *phytoestrogens*—plant compounds converted during the normal digestive process into a form of very weak estrogen. Soybeans are excellent sources of phytoestrogens.
- As a form of herbal remedy, try *ginseng*, a great tonic that improves energy levels. All forms of ginseng are also rich in phytoestrogens.

DON'T:

- Don't smoke.
- Don't take too much alcohol and caffeine. These hinder calcium absorption in the body.
- Don't stress yourself out. Try deep breathing exercises, meditation and yoga to relieve stress.



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PRE-MENSTRUAL SYNDROME

Pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS) is a combination of physical, psychological and emotional symptoms that some women experience a week or two before their menstrual period. Although its exact causes are unknown, PMS is usually related to cyclical hormonal changes. Alcohol, smoking, stress, excessive caffeine or sugar in the body, a sedentary lifestyle, mineral or vitamin deficiency can aggravate this hormonal imbalance.

Many women experience some degree of discomfort before they menstruate while others have symptoms so severe that they disrupt work, normal day-to-day activities and even personal relationships. When symptoms reach this extreme, the condition is referred to as *pre-menstrual dysphoric disorder* (PMDD)

Symptoms:

- Physical Symptoms
 - Bloating
 - Breast tenderness
 - Backaches
 - Headaches
 - Acne
 - Weight gain (due to fluid retention)
 - Constipation or diarrhea
- Emotional and Psychological Symptoms
 - Mood swings
 - Irritability
 - Depression
 - Crying spells
 - Difficulty in concentrating
 - Anxiety
 - Lethargy
 - Lack of interest in sex

DO:

- To help reduce bloating, eat more often but in smaller portions.
- Be generous with your vegetable, fruits and whole grains servings. Get high doses of Vitamin A, betacarotene (food rich in betacarotene include sweet potatoes, broccoli, cantaloupe, pumpkin, carrots, mangoes, peaches, spinach), Vitamin A and Vitamin B6. These vitamins and minerals have been shown to relieve PMS symptoms.
- Get regular exercise.
- Get enough rest and sleep.
- Drink six to eight glasses of water to help eliminate excess fluids.
- You can also consider natural diuretics such as watermelon, asparagus and parsley to avoid retaining excess water.

DON'T:

- Don't drink alcohol and caffeine, especially before menstruation.
- Don't stress yourself out.
- Don't eat salty, sugary and fatty food.

Regular exercise, enough rest and a good diet can help improve a woman's mood during PMS.





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VAGINAL DRYNESS

Vaginal dryness occurs when the lack of vaginal lubrication results in painful sexual intercourse. This may be caused by insufficient foreplay. The decreasing amount of estrogen produced after a menstrual cycle or during menopause may also be reason for vaginal dryness. Taking decongestant medication may also cause this condition.

Symptoms:

- Pain during sexual intercourse

DO:

- Try an over-the-counter lubricant to ease sexual intercourse.
- Try hormone replacement therapy (HRT), topical estrogen creams or estrogen vaginal rings if you are post-menopausal.

DON'T:

- Don't be afraid to share your concerns with your partner. Having an open line of communication will allow you to discover what is pleasurable for you and will allow you to enrich your relationship.

LOSS OF SEXUAL DESIRE

It is quite normal for a woman to go through periods where she does not desire sex. However, this becomes a problem when the condition lasts for a prolonged period of time. Because certain medical conditions and medications can cause diminished interest in sexual activity, it is important to figure out the root of the problem. Common causes also include relationship conflicts, anger, depression, stress, fatigue and alcohol.

Symptoms:

- Diminished interest or desire for sex.

DO:

- Discuss the situation with your partner. Finding out the underlying and true cause of the condition may help address and resolve the issue.

DON'T:

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ORGASMIC DYSFUNCTION

Women vary in their ability to achieve orgasm. Some never reach orgasm while still having pleasurable sexual experiences with their partner. Other women achieve orgasm occasionally or with certain types of stimulation. Further on, some women achieve orgasms each time they engage in sexual activity.

Orgasmic dysfunction may be caused by physical, psychological (or both) problems. A common physical cause may be painful intercourse. When a woman is depressed, angry or harboring other negative emotions, she may be psychologically hindered from reaching sexual peak. Some medicines include orgasmic dysfunction as a side effect.

Symptoms:

- Inability to achieve orgasm during sexual intercourse

DO:

- Try to identify the root of the problem. This will help determine which type of treatment will be most effective.
- Communicate with your partner. Knowing what is sexually pleasurable for you can help you address this concern.

DON'T:

- Don't be afraid to share your concerns with your partner. Having an open line of communication will allow you to discover what is pleasurable for you and will allow you to enrich your relationship.

PAINFUL INTERCOURSE

Although it is normal for sexual intercourse to be uncomfortable at times, it should never be painful. Certain medical conditions like pelvic inflammatory disease, growths, endometriosis, vaginal dryness, irritation or infection may cause painful intercourse. Taking particular medicines or experiencing psychological trauma may also be reasons behind this condition.

Symptoms:

- Pain or discomfort at the vaginal opening or deeper inside during vaginal penetration.

DO:

- Do tell your partner about it, especially if the pain happens suddenly before, during or after sexual intercourse.
- Get a physical examination if the pain persists.

DON'T:

- Don't be afraid to share your concerns with your partner. Having an open line of communication will allow you to discover what is pleasurable for you and will allow you to enrich your relationship.

Occasional discomfort during sexual intercourse is normal. However, if pain persists, get a physical examination.



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VAGINISMUS

Vaginismus is the involuntary spasm of the vaginal muscles, making sexual intercourse and penetration very difficult or impossible. Caused by physical, psychological (or both) problems, it is important to remember that this condition is not deliberate or intentional.

Symptoms:

- Severe tightening of the vaginal muscles during sexual intercourse, prior to penetration

DO:

- Be honest with your partner. Explain that you are not doing it on purpose.
- To determine the cause and proper treatment, you might consider seeking professional help.

DON'T:

- Don't be afraid to share your concerns with your partner. Having an open line of communication will allow you to discover what is pleasurable for you and will allow you to enrich your relationship.



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