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Puberty in reverse

Author: Andersen, Erin

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Abstract (Abstract): For most women perimenopause is like really bad, really long PMS. Perimenopausal women describe themselves out of sorts, irritable, unhappy, angry, tearful, forgetful and "brain dead." Kids and spouses wonder what evil alien took-over mom's brain. Some use that "b" word to describe them. And the women themselves wonder why they don't feel like themselves anymore, why they don't like who they are.
"Perimenopause is like reverse puberty," [Pam Gillaspie] said. "Think of eighth graders. We excuse their behavior and say 'They are hormonal.'"
"We look at it as a weakness not being in control of ourselves. And we don't want to be honest with our family and say, 'you need to cut me some slack this week.' It's an embarrassment to do that. But if you are not honest with your family you set up things for a worse scenario. If everybody knows the score, they will have realistic expectations," Gillaspie said.
"Perimenopause is about hormones, but not about hormones," she said. "It's all about the life changes that occur in the 40s. People have teenagers and aging parents when they are in their 40s. It's about working women and women who are volunteering on top of that. Although there is a hormonal basis that fuels this, it's not all about hormones. You have to look at your life."

Full text: Understanding the hormone and mood swings in perimenopause
First, the bad news. Perimenopause is far worse than menopause. And it can last 10 to 15 years.
Now, the good news. There are things we can do to improve our lives during non-stop hormonal roller coaster ride from hell.
"Perimenopause is the most difficult time in a woman's life," said Pam Gillaspie, a nurse practitioner and director of the Maturity Center at the Women's Clinic in Lincoln whose specialty is helping women age 40 and over.
On April 25, Gillaspie will present a free program on "The Psychological Effects of Perimenopause." It's a topic that always draws a crowd, she said. In years past no less than 225 women showed up to hear her heart-to-heart lectures on "Mid-Life and Beyond."
Perimenopause is those years preceding actual menopause, when the body slowly and inconsistently shuts down hormone production. Typically, perimenopause starts between the age of 35 and 40. It ends around age 51, when menopause begins.
For most women perimenopause is like really bad, really long PMS. Perimenopausal women describe themselves out of sorts, irritable, unhappy, angry, tearful, forgetful and "brain dead." Kids and spouses wonder what evil alien took-over mom's brain. Some use that "b" word to describe them. And the women themselves wonder why they don't feel like themselves anymore, why they don't like who they are. "Perimenopause is like reverse puberty," Gillaspie said. "Think of eighth graders. We excuse their behavior and say 'They are hormonal.'"
It's the same thing in perimenopause, only people are less apt to excuse it because women at age 40 should be able to handle it better. But, like the diabetic who cannot will her body to produce insulin, women cannot will their bodies, minds and emotions to be unaffected by the rise and fall of hormones, she said.
"We look at it as a weakness not being in control of ourselves. And we don't want to be honest with our family and say, 'you need to cut me some slack this week.' It's an embarrassment to do that. But if you are not honest with your family you set up things for a worse scenario. If everybody knows the score, they will have realistic expectations," Gillaspie said.

So what is the score? Physiologically, its about the female hormones estrogen and progesterone. In perimenopause, hormone production naturally decreases, but it also fluctuates wildly with higher highs and lower lows. Estrogen dips can result in hot flashes, memory loss and sleep disruption. Progesterone, which is only produced during ovulation, can drop or even disappear some months because the perimenopausal woman will not ovulate with each cycle. That can cause mood swings, bloating and a loss of sex drive.

Menstrual cycles will change and some months even disappear. Mood swings and other PMS symptoms will go through similar peaks and valleys, Gillaspie said.

"Perimenopause is about hormones, but not about hormones," she said. "It's all about the life changes that occur in the 40s. People have teenagers and aging parents when they are in their 40s. It's about working women and women who are volunteering on top of that. Although there is a hormonal basis that fuels this, it's not all about hormones. You have to look at your life."

"When you work 12 hours a day, shuttle children, pop into bed at 12:30 a.m. and get up at 6:30 a.m., and have no libido, there may be other reasons (besides hormones)," Gillaspie said. "We put a lot of stressors on our world.

So what should you do.

Keep two calendars, one to track your menstrual cycle, the other to track moods and sleep habits over three months. Is there a pattern that coincides with hormone jumps and plunges? If not, the problem could be depression, which is not uncommon during perimenopause.

If it's related, low dose monophasic birth control pills which shut down ovulation and level off hormones provide all the stability that is missing. Only women who don't smoke can safely be put on birth control pills after age 35.

Women also should eat well and exercise. The average American woman gains 10 to 15 pounds at mid-life. And diet alone at this age will not take the pounds off and keep them off, Gillaspie said. Increase your calcium. Decrease your caffeine, fats and sodium. Drink more water. Eat more leafy green vegetables. Avoid alcohol.

Just as important, take care of yourself -- physically, emotionally, intellectually, socially and spiritually, Gillaspie said.

In other words, exercise. Physical exercise increases endorphins, which help mood swings.

"Exercise your brain by reading, or being in a book club. Do something to use your intellect and continue to grow in your wisdom and your journey in life," Gillaspie said.

Exercise emotionally by joining a support group or getting therapy. Read the Bible, meditate or do something that feeds your spirit. Spend time other women and not just other moms with kids on the soccer field, Gillaspie said.

"Take camaraderie where you can find it, but don't talk about problems," Gillaspie said. "Women need to build each other up and not be so negative. Look for positive solutions and not just wallow in our negativity, which is what we sometimes want to do."

Find time -- even 10 minutes a day -- to call your own.

"Women need to take care of themselves," Gillaspie said. "Unfortunately they are real busy taking care of other people. And some women don't think they are important enough to take care of themselves. They think they owe it to their kids, their husbands and their parents, but not themselves. ... Women need to find the time to take care of themselves so they will be healthy enough to care for all of these people that they are ultimately in charge of."

Reach Erin Andersen at 473-7217 or eandersen@journalstar.com.

Suggested reading

There are not a lot of great resources on perimenopause, according to Pam Gillaspie, nurse practitioner and director of the Maturity Center at the Women's Clinic. Here are some books Gillaspie recommends:

"Perimenopause: Preparing for the Change," by Nancy Lee Teaff, Kim Wright Wiley and Mary G. Hammond.

This is a concise and to the point book. It's a good starting point, said Gillaspie.
"Perimenopause:Changes in Women's Health After 35," by Dr. James Huston and Dr. Darlene Lanka.
Any books by Elizabeth Vliet.
"Meditations for Women That Do Too Much, by Anne Wilson Schaef. Although not a book on perimenopause, it is a good book for women to gain insight into their own lives. Women ages 35 and older should read the meditations for Jan. 30 and 31, Gillaspie said.
IF YOU GO
What: Psychological Effects of Perimenopause.
When: Wednesday, April 25, 7-9 p.m.
Where: Plaza Conference Center A, BryanLGH Medical Center East, 1600 S. 48th St.
Tickets: Free. To register call 481-8886.

Illustration

Caption: Pam Gillaspie, a nurse practitioner and director of the Maturity Center at the Women's Clinic in Lincoln, sees many women who suffer through the ups, downs and cyclical loops associated with perimenopause.

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