

Understanding menopause

Menopause is a **normal, inevitable and powerful stage of life** that can impact a women's health and wellbeing in many ways. Like puberty or pregnancy, menopause is a transition to a new stage of life. Everyone's experience of menopause is different, and menopause is seen differently by different cultures.

What is menopause?

In biological terms, menopause literally means 'the stopping of monthly periods' when the ovaries stop producing eggs.

For most, menopause is marked by twelve months in a row without a period.

Every woman who lives beyond midlife will go through menopause.

What is perimenopause?

Perimenopause is the years leading up to menopause when hormonal changes can impact physical, emotional and mental health and wellbeing – from brain fog and hot flushes, to mood changes and fatigue, and a range of other symptoms.

These changes can start in someone's late 30s/early 40s and last two to ten years, or five years on average.

Often the term menopause is used to refer to both perimenopause and menopause.

When do women go through menopause?

The average age of menopause in New Zealand is 51 years (between the ages of 45 and 55).

Some will go through menopause sooner.

Before the age of 40 is known as 'premature ovarian insufficiency' (POI) or between 40 and 45 is known as 'early menopause'.

'Surgical menopause' is when both ovaries are surgically removed before a woman goes through menopause naturally.

'Induced menopause' is when the ovaries are damaged either by disease or medical treatments before a woman goes through menopause naturally.



What are the symptoms of perimenopause and menopause?

A New Zealand survey* found that 89% of women aged 40-60 have experienced new or worsening symptoms associated with menopause. Menopause symptoms can be mild, moderate or severe. Some people notice nothing at all.

As many as 30-40+ symptoms can be associated with menopause. You can learn more about them in our [symptoms explained](#) fact sheet. Some of the most common are:

Memory and concentration issues (brain fog)	Trouble focusing, remembering things, or finding the right words. Often linked to hormonal changes and fatigue.
Mood changes	Feeling more irritable, anxious, or low than usual. Mood shifts can come and go.
Difficulty sleeping, tiredness or fatigue	Feeling unusually tired or lacking energy, often due to hormonal changes or disrupted sleep.
Hot flushes	A sudden feeling of heat, often with sweating and redness.
Joint aches and pains	Stiffness or soreness in joints and muscles, sometimes linked to lower oestrogen levels.
Headaches and migraines	Hormonal fluctuations can make headaches or migraines more frequent or intense.
Heavy or irregular periods	Changes in flow or timing are common as hormone levels shift before periods stop completely.

*NZIER and Global Women: The silent transition Understanding the impacts of menopause in New Zealand workplaces 2023.

How do women's experiences or views of perimenopause and menopause differ?

Although there is still more to learn, we know that everyone's experience of menopause is different, and menopause can be seen differently across cultures.

Research is limited on the experiences of menopause for wāhine Māori, Pacific, women from ethnic communities, and disabled women.

People and cultures understand menopause in different ways. For some, it's not widely discussed, while others recognise it as a natural and meaningful stage of life.

Diverse perspectives and experiences

For wāhine Māori, menopause (or ruahinetanga) may be seen as a time of transition into deeper wisdom and leadership, where women can take up new roles and responsibilities in their whānau and community.

For Pacific women, talanoa is a way to maintain respectful communication and relationships and support challenging conversations. It includes connection through sharing ideas and stories.

Some wāhine Māori, Pacific women, and women from ethnic communities might find it harder to talk about menopause and may be hesitant to ask for help because of stigma around women's health. These groups, along with disabled women, can also face barriers to accessing health services.

Some disabled women might go through menopause earlier. Symptoms of menopause can sometimes be attributed to someone's disability, and some symptoms can be more challenging for people with disabilities, potentially requiring additional support to maintain their wellbeing.

What are the positives of life after menopause?

Menopause is a period of transition, not an end point. It's important that women have the information and support they need to thrive during this stage, but it's also nice to know there are some things to look forward to after menopause.

Some of the positives of being post-menopause are having more energy, confidence, and respect; and feeling more comfortable speaking up about things that matter. This can be a time of deeper wisdom, where women can take up new roles and responsibilities. And no more periods!