

## **What Exactly Is Perimenopause and How Do I Know I'm in It?**

Perhaps you've been told by a healthcare provider that you're entering perimenopause, or have heard the term floating around and wonder just exactly what it means - and if it pertains to you. Here, we'll break it down for you.

For starters, perimenopause and menopause are not interchangeable terms. Meaning "around menopause,"<sup>1</sup> perimenopause is the time leading up to menopause, also known as the transition to menopause or "menopausal transition."<sup>1</sup> It marks the ramp down of a woman's reproductive years, heading towards the eventual end of her menstrual cycle;<sup>1</sup> once a woman has not had a period for 12 consecutive months, she has officially hit menopause.<sup>2</sup>

Perimenopause begins around eight to ten years before the point of menopause,<sup>2</sup> usually starting between the ages of 45-55,<sup>3</sup> with some women noticing changes beginning in their mid-30s.

### **What is happening to my body!?**

If not surgically or medically induced, the transition to menopause is a natural biological process that occurs as women get older, during which time the ovaries gradually stop functioning.<sup>2</sup> Because of this:

- **Less estrogen and progesterone, the hormones responsible for the menstrual cycle, are produced<sup>2,3</sup>**
- **Levels of estrogen (the main female hormone) rise and fall unevenly<sup>2</sup>**
- **Eggs in the ovaries begin to deplete<sup>2</sup>**

It is the adjustments your body makes to the decreases and fluctuations in hormones that can cause the uncomfortable symptoms you may begin to experience during this stage.<sup>2</sup>

### **How will I know I'm perimenopausal?**

- **Changes in menstrual cycle**  
One of the biggest markers that you're entering perimenopause is changes in your menstrual cycle; notably, when it begins regularly varying by seven days of your typical cycle.<sup>4</sup> You might also experience skipped, irregular, or erratic periods, shorter or longer cycles,<sup>1,2</sup> and heavier or lighter flows. It might be helpful during this time to track your periods.

*If you have spotting between periods, heavy bleeding, getting your period more frequently, or they're lasting a lot longer, speak to your doctor.*

- **Other common indicators that you may be perimenopausal include symptoms caused by hormone fluctuations,<sup>2</sup> such as:**
  - Hot flashes and night sweats<sup>5</sup>
  - Sleep problems<sup>5</sup>
  - Mood changes, including depression and anxiety<sup>5</sup>
  - Vaginal dryness, leading to painful intercourse<sup>5</sup>
  - Skin changes<sup>3</sup>
  - Weight gain<sup>3</sup>

### **How long will I be in perimenopause?**

The transition to menopause generally lasts from two to eight years (sometimes as long as 14<sup>3</sup>), with the average woman experiencing it for four years.<sup>2</sup> Research has shown that its duration and a person's age at onset can be impacted by elements such as health, lifestyle and diet factors including smoking<sup>4</sup>, genetics, race, and ethnicity.<sup>3,6</sup>

### **What else do I need to know?**

- You can still get pregnant during perimenopause! While ovulation (when the ovary releases an egg) occurs less regularly during this time, and may even stop all together, if you are having periods, you can still get pregnant.<sup>2</sup>
- Birth control pills can mask or mimic perimenopause. Because they contain synthetic forms of estrogen and/or progesterone, birth control pills can prevent the body from recognizing a natural decline in those hormones.<sup>7</sup> The pill may conversely cause side effects similar to symptoms of perimenopause,<sup>7</sup> leading a person to believe they're perimenopausal when they may not be.

*The contents of this article are for informational purposes only and not intended to provide medical advice, treat, diagnose, or replace the advice of a licensed medical professional. Please consult with your healthcare provider before making any treatment, dietary, exercise, or lifestyle changes to ensure that these changes are appropriate for you.*

Sources

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/perimenopause/symptoms-causes/syc-20354666>

<sup>2</sup> <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/21608-perimenopause>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/what-menopause>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.glowm.com/section-](https://www.glowm.com/section-view/heading/Endocrinology%20of%20the%20Perimenopausal%20Woman/item/82#.YvZwUrbMJdg)

[view/heading/Endocrinology%20of%20the%20Perimenopausal%20Woman/item/82#.YvZwUrbMJdg](https://www.glowm.com/section-view/heading/Endocrinology%20of%20the%20Perimenopausal%20Woman/item/82#.YvZwUrbMJdg)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4834516/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.endocrineweb.com/menopause-different-women-color>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/menopause/symptoms-causes/syc-20353397>