WOMEN'S HEALTH

Hidden Hormonal Changes: Lesser-Known Premenopausal Symptoms Affecting Women Today

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Abstract

Premenopause, also known as perimenopause, is the transitional period before menopause in a woman's reproductive life. Many well-known symptoms such as hot flashes, night sweats, and unpredictable menstrual periods are not often recognized, and the symptoms that affect a woman physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially can also be hidden. Brain fog, anxiety, sleep disturbances, increased body odor, lowered confidence, and digestive problems are just a few examples of the lesser-known symptoms of premenopause which women need to be aware of to take an active role in receiving medical assistance and support.

Keywords: Premenopause, Perimenopause, Hormonal changes, Women's Health, Brain Fog, Anxiety, Sleep disturbances, Emotional Well-being

Introduction

Today, women's health has become an increasingly emphasized topic of conversation within our society, yet the problem of premenopause often appears overlooked. Premenopause, also referred to as perimenopause, is the stage of life during which women transition into menopause. This is defined by fluctuating hormone levels. Hormonal changes affect the female sex hormones estrogen and progesterone, along with many other body systems besides the reproductive system. Women and health care providers alike have commonly acknowledged symptoms of premenopause such as unpredictable periods and hot flashes, but numerous other lesser-known premenopausal signs that may impact a woman both mentally and physically are rarely mentioned or discussed in public, clinical, and awareness venues. As many women have little knowledge of what the hormones are doing in their bodies during this phase of transition, they may feel unsure and confused of what is happening, even attributing some signs to other more serious problems. Knowledge of these common but unrecognized symptoms can lead to greater comfort and well-being during this change of life.

Understanding Premenopause

The premenopausal phase typically starts sometime in between a woman's mid-thirties and mid-forties, though it varies between each woman. During this transition, the ovarian function decreases and hormone production changes; thus creating the need for hormonal rebalancing. A woman has entered menopause once she has not had a menstrual period for twelve consecutive months, and yet, premenopause can be a long and hormonally varied process. These fluctuating hormones have an effect on most body systems including the neurological, cardiovascular, digestive, and musculoskeletal organs and hence the many unrecognized or unmentioned physical symptoms women may encounter.

Lesser-Known Premenopausal Symptoms -

1. Brain Fog and Cognitive Changes Brain fog seems to be a largely under-recognized symptom among women undergoing hormonal changes; but many women say it consists of a mental haze, poor concentration, multitasking issues, and a decrease in recall and cognitive function, all believed to be due to brain disorder symptoms. These symptoms are experienced because hormonal shifts directly affect the body's

neurotransmitters, and thus temporarily inhibit the brain's normal functions. Frightened that the symptoms signify something more serious can create extreme anxiety in women.

2. Increased Anxiety and Mood Disturbances Women who never experience problems with mental health often describe an increase in anxiety, depression, and panic attacks as the main signal of their body beginning to undergo premenopause. Since there is an effect on the chemicals in the brain such as dopamine and serotonin, a woman's emotions and mental state will likely become irregular. Often this symptom will be blamed on the effects of life stress on the body instead of a hormonal cause.

3. Joint and Muscle Pain An estrogen deficit may contribute to more inflammation and decreased lubrication in women's joints and muscles causing pain and aching. Muscle ache and stiffness is commonly recognized as one symptom of premenopause and yet may be unrecognized, just as this issue is attributed to aging.

4. Changes in Body Odor It may seem surprising but women can also experience an alteration in body odor. Hormonal shifts in the body can affect a woman's skin microflora and a woman's natural body odor. Though many women have never experienced this before and it is rarely talked about, it can be considered another fairly common premenopausal symptom and is the source of many concerns among women.

5. Heart Palpitations Women undergoing hormonal changes may have unexplained heart palpitations which is characterized by irregular heart rhythm, pounding in the chest, or skipped heartbeats. Even though they may be very uncomfortable to experience, in premenopause, they are often not associated with additional dangerous symptoms and are mostly believed to be the result of fluctuating hormones. It is nevertheless essential that any woman experiencing palpitations consult her physician and get screened for underlying cardiac disease so she can be treated safely and properly.

6. Digestive Disturbances Women can experience symptoms such as bloating, indigestion, and an increased appetite along with changes in appetite, and bowel habits; these can all be symptoms related to hormonal fluctuations. Since digestive changes do not always appear to be hormone-related, women do not recognize this as a possible sign that her body is in premenopause.

7. Sleep Disturbances Other than Night Sweats Hot flashes not only contribute to a woman's difficulty sleeping but in premenopause, women may find they also experience increased wakefulness or difficulty sleeping that is also related to a woman's fluctuating hormones. Reduced sleep has a negative impact on a woman's day to day moods and productivity.

8. Dry Eyes and Vision Changes Women's hormonal changes can also affect a woman's eyes. Due to decreasing hormone levels, a woman may find that her eyes are dry, light sensitive and that her vision has blurred, this may not even seem like an hormonal issue, it may appear just like aging is the cause.

9. Reduced Confidence and Identity Changes Because women's mental and physical state are so erratic and changed during premenopause, their identities may become unclear and this may be another sign that hormones are contributing. A woman's appearance may also be affecting her appearance and physical health so this will contribute to lowered self-esteem. Many women are saying that they feel like a completely different person.

10. Increased Sensitivity to Stress This increased sensitivity will be seen by physical symptoms and environmental discomforts and changes at work such as loud noises and crowds. At this stage, hormonal fluctuations can create the feeling that it is harder to manage stresses.

Why Are These Symptoms Often Overlooked?

There are several factors contributing to these premenopausal symptoms being overlooked or misunderstood: The social norms of aging in society. The lack of awareness, education, and communication about premenopausal symptoms. They are misidentified as the symptoms of more complex problems or the psychosomatic nature of women. An open and honest discussion of the more intimate signs of hormonal changes

can sometimes be awkward or embarrassing. Few advertisements and campaigns regarding women's health focus on premenopausal signs beyond those which have been previously recognized. Many women continue to experience premenopause alone and unacknowledged.

The Importance of Awareness

The more women know and are told about the signs of premenopause beyond the more well-known symptoms, the better quality of life they will lead. Educating women regarding the hormonal changes their bodies are going through can enable them to better identify them as a hormone related issue and therefore take appropriate steps and seek further help. Workplace education can also empower women with the knowledge that their health may be affected due to changing hormone levels and to work on adapting it so the physical and emotional toll is reduced.

Conclusion

Premenopause is the least understood and acknowledged stage in women's lives. During premenopause, not only absent/irregular periods and hot flushes occur but women will experience many other changes in their life, hormonal changes throughout a women's lifetime but in premenopause many women's lives are impacted by this from women's thought process to women's emotions, women's sleep, women's digestion and finally how women perceive themselves. Women will experience and have all of these symptoms such as brain fog, anxiety, aches, heart palpitations, a changed sense of smell, reduced self esteem and still most women do not speak about them to anyone and therefore feel alone, confused and unsupported. Due to a lack of or poor knowledge of other lesser acknowledged premenopausal symptoms, there are many cases of delayed/misdiagnosis. A great need for education and a better understanding needs to be generated among women, medical providers and the women's families and communities in order to achieve positive regard towards the premenopausal symptoms and women will no longer be in the situation of not having the support that they might need. With women living longer it has been calculated women will spend more of their life in their premenopausal transition and postmenopausal stages so the education of the hormonal changes within this otherwise hidden aspect of premenopause will be invaluable in not only allowing women to acknowledge them but enabling women to remain at optimum level of well-being. When recognition of these lesser publicized symptoms arises, women will become educated in the necessary lifestyle changes required, seeking help and staying healthy.

By telling the truth of these secrets within premenopause, women will feel more at ease with entering into the following menopause stage and therefore being empowered in their transition. With the advancement of awareness and medical research, women will have greater information and this feeling of loneliness will no longer need to be addressed

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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