



# Supporting Your Menopause Transition at Work



# Understand Perimenopause and menopause

**Perimenopause** and **menopause** are natural phases in a woman's life, marked by hormonal changes. These variations can lead to different symptoms, both physical and emotional. During this period, it is common to experience irregular periods, hot flashes, night sweats, and mood changes.

**Medically, the symptoms associated with menopause can be grouped into four categories:**



1. Vasomotor symptoms, such as hot flashes.



2. Psychological symptoms, including anxiety and mood swings.



3. Musculoskeletal symptoms, like joint pain.



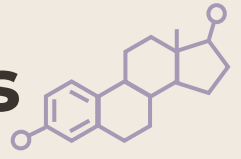
4. Urogenital symptoms, affecting urinary health.

These symptoms, caused by hormonal fluctuations, can last several years and impact all aspects of personal and professional life.

While much remains to be learned about the well-being of aging women, this guide provides options based on solid research. This includes lifestyle changes, self-management, health techniques, and various treatment options. The goal is to offer practical strategies to better navigate this transition, both at home and at work.

**It is important to remember that every woman experiences this phase differently. Individual experiences may vary depending on factors such as culture, social status, disability, and the environment in which they live.**

# Focus on the Role of Hormones



Perimenopause is characterized by the more or less even decline, as well as the spikes and drops, of both progesterone and oestrogens over the years from the mid thirties until menopause is completed. Aside from the main hormones involved in producing ovules and supporting pregnancy, other hormones also play an important role in how women experience perimenopause:

## KEY HORMONES INVOLVED

**OESTROGENS:** They are estradiol, estriol and estrone and each has a specific role in the female body. Estradiol builds the lining of the womb, protects against bone loss, helps with cardiovascular health, affects serotonin levels and helps the vagina stay hydrated. Low estradiol levels cause hot flashes and night sweats, brain fog and cognitive dysfunctions, dry skin and itchiness, bladder issues, depressive states, aching joints and body pain.

**PROGESTERONE:** Maintains and thickens womb lining, soothes and helps with sleep, helps manage appetite, has an anti-inflammatory effect and has an inverse relationship to cortisol. Too much progesterone can cause depressive states and lack of it can cause anxiety and insomnia.

**TESTOSTERONE:** Supports sexual desire, maintains energy levels and can be converted to oestrogens. Women have 3 times the amount of testosterone compared to oestrogens during their menstruating years.

**ADRENALINE:** Is released by the adrenal glands in response to stressors. Adrenaline triggers fight or flight response in the autonomic nervous system, causing a cascade of emotional responses from anxiety to anger.

**CORTISOL:** Is the “daylight” hormone released by the adrenal glands, normally in the morning. It can spike under the effects of stress, trauma or peri/menopausal hormonal fluctuations. Has an inverse relationship with progesterone. Too much cortisol can cause issues with cognition and focus.

**MELATONIN:** Is the “darkness” hormone that promotes sleep. It supports a healthy circadian rhythm and lowers body temperature. It helps maintain healthy digestion, immune function and metabolism. It has a direct relationship with cortisol and progesterone.

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## The Impact of Hormonal Imbalances

The imbalance between estradiol and progesterone can cause anxiety, important changes in periods, food cravings, weight gain, headaches and low energy. This is especially compounded if high levels of stress are present, creating higher levels of cortisol and adrenaline. In turn, the combination of hormonal fluctuations and higher levels of cortisol can contribute to issues with melatonin production.

## Additional Considerations

However, hormones are far from the only factors contributing to the impacts on individuals' physical and mental health, especially as it relates to women in the workforce.

# A sobering social context

**By 2030, an estimated 1 billion individuals globally will be navigating menopause.**

In Canada, women aged 45 to 55 represent the fastest-growing segment of the workforce, comprising 25% of all employees.

This group not only plays a crucial role in their professional environments but also often balances caregiving responsibilities for both children and aging parents.

Additionally, they face significant challenges, including a notable wage gap compared to their male counterparts, as well as heightened physiological and mental health concerns.

Statistics Canada highlights that women in this age bracket are more likely to experience poor mental health, particularly those from marginalized communities, with increased rates of anxiety, depression, and stress.

While Canadian workplaces are increasingly acknowledging the importance of mental health support, there remains a pressing need to address the unique challenges faced by women in perimenopause. Stigma and a lack of tailored support continue to hinder progress.

A report from Deloitte Canada reveals that unmanaged menopause symptoms lead to approximately 540,000 lost workdays each year. This translates to an estimated financial impact of \$3.3 billion in lost income due to reduced hours, pay, or even workforce exit.

Recognizing and addressing these issues is essential for fostering an inclusive and supportive workplace for all employees.



## Menopause and work in numbers

### 51 years old

Most Western women reach menopause at around 51 years of age.

### 45-55 years old

Women aged 45-55 years represent an increasing portion of the global workforce.

### 1 billion

women will be going through menopause by 2030

### 50%

of women experience sleep disruption caused by perimenopause symptoms.

### 1/4

1 in 4 women are more likely to retire early due to menopause symptoms.

### 15%

Only 15% of workplaces include accommodations for menopause-related symptoms, while more than half of women (51%) have expressed the need for things like empathy from colleagues and more flexible work options.

### \$1,8 billion

Menopause-related lost work time costs the U.S. economy \$1.8 billion each year.

# How women are affected

The forties and fifties are often periods of high income for many individuals, as they hold positions of responsibility and begin planning for retirement. However, it is also during this time that women are most likely to go through perimenopause or menopause.

## Women frequently report a decline in their work capacity, manifested through symptoms such as:



Lack of concentration



Fatigue



Memory issues



Feelings of depression or low mood



Loss of self-confidence

## Data shows that:

**28%** of symptomatic women reported having poor work capacity.

**45%** indicated they had moderate work capacity.

This situation is worsened by the unpredictability of symptoms, social stigma, and a lack of awareness in the workplace, creating a challenging environment for women:

- Studies show that women **over 50 are often subject to stigma and discrimination** related to their menopausal status.
- Negative stereotypes can reinforce the idea that menopausal women are irrational or underperforming, becoming self-fulfilling prophecies. For example, **29% of respondents** feared being seen as «weak, old, or outdated.»

These stereotypes also hinder women's career ambitions:

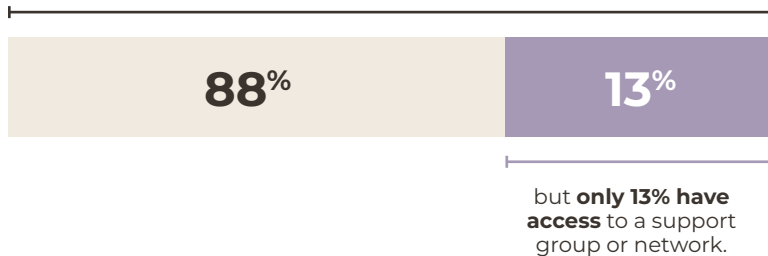
- **More than half of the women** surveyed are concerned about the impact of their symptoms on their professional image.
- **Approximately 44%** have reduced their participation in professional networks due to perimenopause, and **40% have noticed a negative impact on their workplace relationships.**



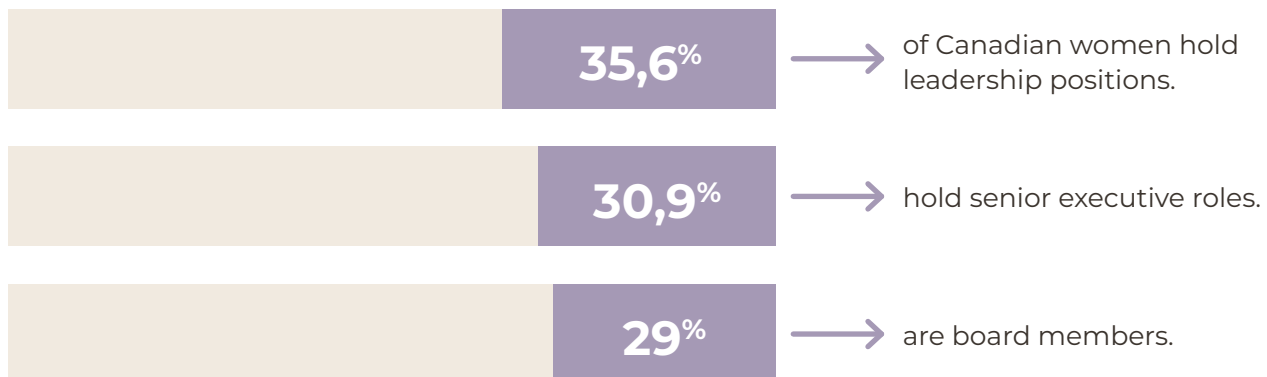
**Nearly half fear being discriminated** against because their symptoms are associated with aging.

## Support is crucial:

**88% of women believe** it is helpful to have people with whom they can share their perimenopause experiences,



This discrimination can illustrate the glass ceiling phenomenon. According to a 2023 survey:



It is important to note that women with disabilities, women of color, and gender non-conforming individuals are often underrepresented in leadership roles and on boards.

# Factors contributing to health challenges during perimenopause

## FACTORS

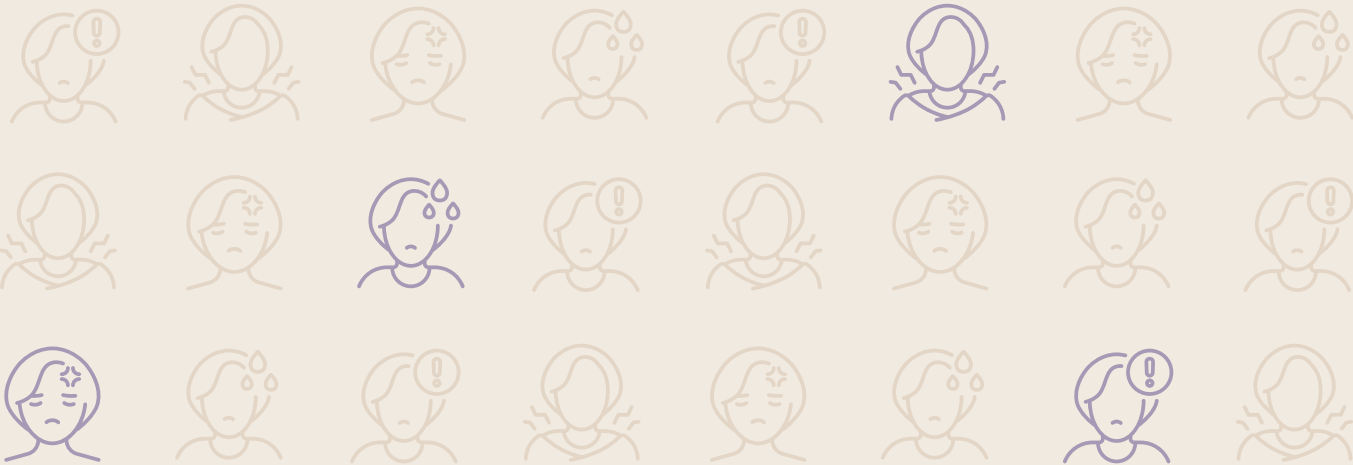
**Hormonal fluctuations:** Changes in estradiol and progesterone levels can significantly affect mood and mental well-being.

**Physical symptoms:** Hot flashes, night sweats, sleep disturbances and other physical symptoms can contribute to stress and anxiety.

**Role strain:** Balancing work, family, and personal responsibilities can be overwhelming for women in this age group.

**Societal expectations:** Stereotypes and societal pressures can impact women’s mental health during this life stage.

**Stigma and discrimination:** Fear of judgment can prevent women from seeking help or disclosing mental health challenges at work.



# Perimenopause self-care guide

Because hormonal fluctuations can be at the root cause of many symptoms and because human beings are strongly affected by their societal, social, personal and professional contexts, these 3 approaches should be considered synergistically:

1

Managing the causes and effects of stress

2

Optimizing holistic health pillars

3

Considering and weighing treatments

## 1. Managing the causes and effects of stress

Stress disrupts the endocrine system, leading to an overproduction of cortisol and adrenaline. While a certain level of stress can be beneficial for productivity, chronic stress has harmful consequences, including:



### **Elevated cortisol levels:**

Excess cortisol over a prolonged period affects sleep and the ability to rest, making it difficult to manage perimenopausal symptoms.



### **Physical response:**

During times of hormonal upheaval, what might be manageable at other stages of life can become overwhelming.



# Focus on vulnerability factors

Certain factors can intensify nervous system dysfunction during menopause, leading to more severe symptoms:

## TRAUMA HISTORY

Past experiences, such as severe childhood neglect, can increase sensitivity to stress and worsen menopausal symptoms. Women with unresolved trauma, such as relationship abuse or traumatic events, may find their menopause experience particularly challenging.

## PSYCHOSOCIAL RISKS

**A poorly designed work environment can also contribute to stress. These factors include:**

- A heavy or unmanageable workload
- Unrealistic expectations
- Role ambiguity
- Frequent organizational changes
- Lack of job satisfaction and recognition
- Imbalance between work and personal life
- Poor interpersonal relationships
- Lack of support in the workplace
- Workplace violence, including harassment and bullying

## CHRONIC STRESS

The burdens of work, caregiving, or financial pressures can also exacerbate menopausal symptoms.



### Impact on BIPOC Communities

Research indicates that women from BIPOC communities experience more intense and persistent menopausal symptoms, often due to trauma related to systemic conditions, such as racism or gender-based violence. Additionally, they tend to receive less medical support and treatment compared to their white counterparts.

## Stress management strategies:



### Address Underlying Health Issues:

Consult with your healthcare provider to rule out any underlying conditions, such as thyroid disorders or anemia, that may be contributing to your symptoms.



### Seek Support:

Connect with colleagues, friends, or support groups to share experiences and receive encouragement. Consider using resources like the “Having an Easier Perimenopause Conversation at Work” guide below.



### Practice Mindfulness:

Engage in mindfulness practices to cultivate present-moment awareness and reduce stress. Techniques like diaphragmatic breathing can help calm the nervous system. Spending time outdoors can also lower cortisol levels and enhance your mood.



### Exercise Regularly but Moderately:

Incorporate moderate exercise into your routine to boost energy levels. Avoid strenuous workouts that may lead to fatigue. Aim for daily walks and consider “exercise snacks”—short bursts of activity lasting 5 to 10 minutes, 2 to 4 times a day. Gentle practices like yoga, tai chi, or qi gong can promote relaxation and restoration.



## 2. Optimizing holistic health pillars

Since perimenopause can manifest in the form of physical, psychological and emotional changes, it's important to tackle challenges on multiple fronts. Working women often report issues with stress, sleep, daytime fatigue and mental health. The following section is designed to help with those issues but doesn't constitute an exhaustive guide and doesn't replace the guidance of a health practitioner or a certified menopause expert.

### Prioritizing sleep

Sleep is often disrupted during perimenopause, affecting many aspects of life. Hormonal adjustments can make falling asleep and staying asleep more difficult, which may lead to anxiety and worsen sleep disturbances, creating a vicious cycle.

#### Here are some strategies to improve sleep quality:



##### 1. Establish a Sleep Routine:

- Keep a consistent sleep schedule.
- Create a relaxing bedtime routine.
- Limit exposure to blue light at least 90 minutes before bed.
- Try to go to bed and wake up at the same time each day.

##### 2. Promote Melatonin Production:

- Get 10 to 15 minutes of morning sunlight exposure to help regulate your circadian rhythm, which can enhance melatonin production at night.

##### 3. Practice Good Sleep Hygiene:

- Create a comfortable, quiet, and completely dark sleep environment.
- Avoid caffeine after 11 a.m.
- Limit alcohol, spicy foods, and sugar consumption in the evening.

##### 4. Manage Hot Flashes:

- Wear layered clothing and choose breathable fabrics.
- Keep your bedroom at a cool temperature.
- Explore natural remedies such as herbal teas or supplements to help reduce symptoms.

##### 5. Consult a Professional for Severe Sleep Issues:

- If you experience persistent sleep problems, don't hesitate to consult a healthcare professional who specializes in menopause for appropriate support.



# Focus on mental health

Mental health issues, exacerbated by perimenopause and menopause, have become one of the leading causes of absenteeism and early retirement. Hormonal changes can affect mood, anxiety, and emotional well-being. According to the *Journal of Affective Disorders*, women in perimenopause are 40% more likely to experience depressive symptoms than those in premenopause. Mood fluctuations, often misdiagnosed as major depressive disorders, require special attention.

## Recognize and Take Action

Recognizing the signs of hormone-related depression and anxiety and seeking professional support promptly can make a significant difference in the workplace. In addition to medical treatments, it is crucial to enhance emotional resilience through self-care practices.

## Here are some strategies:

### MINDFULNESS AND COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL THERAPY (CBT)

Learn to manage anxious thoughts and feelings through mindfulness techniques and CBT, which can help restructure negative thinking patterns.

### SUPPORT NETWORKS

Connect with other women and individuals with similar experiences to gain emotional support. This can create a network of understanding and encouragement.

## Gut Health and Mental Well-being

The gut microbiome plays an essential role in our mental and physiological health. A healthy microbiome is linked to better cognitive function, which is particularly important during perimenopause.

### ADDRESS INFLAMMATION

During perimenopause, some food intolerance may worsen, leading to inflammation. Foods to monitor include gluten, dairy, sugar, and certain processed food ingredients.

### EAT FOR GUT HEALTH

Consume at least 20 grams of varied fiber daily, primarily from vegetables. A Mediterranean diet, rich in whole foods, fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, and healthy fats, can improve overall health and reduce perimenopausal symptoms. Eliminating alcohol, sugar, and processed foods can also have positive effects.

Ensure proper hydration throughout the day. Prioritize water and herbal teas, and limit the intake of coffee, fruit juices, and sodas.

Incorporate more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes, along with products like yogurt, kimchi, kombucha, sauerkraut, and other lacto-fermented vegetables into your diet. These foods nourish the beneficial bacteria in your gut.

# Managing Daytime Fatigue

## 1. Manage Stress:

Chronic stress can disrupt your autonomic nervous system, leading to increased fatigue. Implementing effective stress management techniques can significantly improve your ability to cope with daytime tiredness. Refer to the stress management section above for helpful strategies.

**2. Rest and Nap:** Pay attention to your body's signals and take breaks as needed. Short naps of 10 to 20 minutes before 4 PM can help you feel more refreshed and alert without interfering with nighttime sleep.

## 3. Set Boundaries:

Establish clear boundaries between your work and personal life, and be prepared to enforce them. Communicate with family and friends about your need for personal time and the importance of respecting your fluctuating energy levels.

## 4. Prioritize Yourself:

After work, focus on activities that rejuvenate you rather than simply checking off tasks. Seek support from your partner, friends, and family to help lighten your load and share responsibilities.

## 5. Communicate with Your Employer:

Discuss potential flexible work arrangements with your employer, particularly if your sleep is affected. For instance, consider negotiating flexibility around early morning meetings to allow for additional rest.





# Focus on having an easier perimenopause conversation at work



If you feel like perimenopause symptoms are negatively impacting your performance and how you feel at work, consider having a conversation with your manager or with your organization's HR representative.

## BEFORE THE CONVERSATION

**Know your rights:** Research your company's policies on mental health, flexible work, and perimenopause support.

**Choose your timing:** Plan for a calm and productive moment.

## DURING THE CONVERSATION

**Advocate for yourself:** Outline your needs and suggest potential solutions.

**Share honestly:** Share your experiences and how they affect your mental health and your work.

## EXAMPLES OF POLICIES TO CONSIDER

**Flexible work hours:** Offering flexible work options can help women manage stress and balance their responsibilities.

**Healthcare coverage:** Ensures that women have access to mental health professionals, support groups, and other resources, including access to hormonal treatments and related care.

**Mental health programs:** Employers can implement comprehensive mental health programs that address the specific needs of women in perimenopause and menopause.

**Inclusive culture:** Fosters a workplace that values diversity and respects each individual's needs and dignity.

## After your initial conversation, follow-up to keep the momentum going.

This will ensure your employer stays focused on your needs and can provide additional support if necessary.

Keep in mind that your wellbeing and success matter! By speaking up, you can contribute to creating a healthier and more inclusive culture not only for yourself but also for your colleagues, present and future.

### 3. Considering and Weighing Treatments



#### Hormone Therapy

Considered a safe option for individuals without a risk of endocrine-related cancers or blood clots. Bio-identical hormone therapy, including micronized progesterone, transdermal estradiol, and transdermal testosterone, is often recommended.

It is advisable to begin hormone therapy at the onset of symptoms and ideally within 10 years of the last menstrual period.



#### Alternatives to Hormone Therapy

If hormone therapy is not an option, several alternatives can help manage symptoms:

- **Hot flushes:**  
Non-hormonal medications, behavioral therapies, and complementary approaches can be effective.
- **Sleep optimization:**  
Relaxation techniques, changes in the sleep environment, and supplements may help improve sleep quality.
- **Cognitive issues:**  
Regular exercise, a healthy diet, and mental stimulation can support cognitive clarity.
- **Genitourinary health:**  
Lubricants, vaginal moisturizers, and certain medical prescriptions can address urinary and vaginal symptoms.



#### Consultation with an Expert

It is essential to consult a healthcare professional trained in perimenopause to discuss your symptoms and appropriate treatment options. Proper follow-up care will help identify the best protocol to improve your quality of life.

#### Additional resources

- Menopause Foundation of Canada
- The Menopause Society
- The North American Menopause Society
- International Menopause Society
- National Network of Libraries of Medicine
- Menopause Resource Center

# Menopause Hormonal Therapy (MHT)



For nearly two decades, Menopausal Hormone Therapy (MHT) has been significantly under-prescribed following the conclusions of the 2002 Women’s Health Initiative (WHI) study. This study suggested a link between hormone therapy and increased risks of heart disease, strokes, and breast cancer, which sparked significant debate within the medical community.

## NEW RESEARCH

More recent research has challenged these initial conclusions, leading to a better understanding of the benefits and risks of hormone therapy. According to the Menopause Society, MHT remains the first-line treatment for many disruptive symptoms, particularly for healthy women who start treatment before age 60 and within 10 years of the onset of menopause.

## EVALUATING TREATMENT CHOICES

As women will spend approximately half of their lives postmenopause, it is crucial to evaluate treatment options by considering both risks and quality of life, in the short and long term.

## KEY CONSIDERATIONS

### Long-term health:

The leading causes of death in older women include fractures and heart disease. While MHT has not yet been proven to prevent conditions like Alzheimer’s or heart disease, it can help with:

- **Preventing muscle loss:**  
Maintaining muscle mass, essential for mobility and quality of life.
- **Combating osteoporosis:**  
Helping to preserve bone density.
- **Managing insulin resistance and prediabetes:**  
Supporting better metabolic health.
- **Reducing neuroinflammation and gut issues:**  
Enhancing overall well-being.

## IMPACT ON PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL LIFE

The health and well-being of postmenopausal women affect not only their quality of life but also their ability to work efficiently, advance in their careers, and enjoy a peaceful retirement. Therefore, it is vital to consider all available treatment options and discuss any concerns with a qualified healthcare professional to make informed decisions.



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