

## Learning to love menopause.

by Paula Span

**The aging of the baby boom population has made menopause a popular and relevant topic. Four women describe how going through menopause affected them physically, emotionally and socially.**

© COPYRIGHT 1997 The Hearst Corporation

From sex to self-esteem, some things get better after "the change" Real women share their intimate stories.

It was an eye-opener when Pat Parisi, who was encountering the first signs of impending menopause and felt in need of information, attended her first meeting of a group called Red Hot Mamas in Ridgefield, CT. About 30 women showed up, drawn by a notice in the local newspaper, to talk about their symptoms, their doctors, and their complicated lives. "I don't recall my mother ever telling me about it when she was going through menopause," says Parisi, who lives in nearby Brookfield. "Years ago, it was a hush-hush thing."

Not anymore. With 40 million baby boomers passing through menopause during the next two decades, the taboos are rapidly disappearing. That Connecticut support group, for instance, has evolved into a nationwide monthly educational program (now known as PRIME PLUS/Red Hot Mamas) offered in 30 locations--hospitals, physicians' offices, and HMO centers. "We're saying the M-word out loud," says founder Karen Giblin.

Menopause is a highly individual transition. Defined as the point at which a woman hasn't menstruated for 12 consecutive months, the average age of onset is 51. The first signs of perimenopause (usually during the months or years preceding menopause itself) appear in the 40s, however. Along with the irregularity and eventual cessation of menstrual periods, most women notice some combination of the following physical changes caused by a sharp decline in estrogen: hot flashes, mood swings, and vaginal and urinary-tract problems. But which symptoms a woman develops, how seriously, and for how long, vary considerably. An estimated 15 to 25 percent will barely notice them; another 10 to 25 percent have more severe problems. Most women get through with symptoms that are mild to manageable. Roughly 25 percent begin hormone replacement therapy (HRT).

Psychologically, too, there's a range of responses.

"Some women feel better--they're happy not to have periods anymore. Others see menopause as a sign of getting older and have trouble with that," says Isaac Schiff, M.D., author of the recently published guidebook *Menopause* and chief of obstetrics and gynecology at

Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. With the fear of pregnancy gone, "Some say their sex lives have never been better. Others lose interest [in sex] and say that bothers them a great deal. It's all over the map."

Social changes wrought by the baby boom and the women's movement make menopause even more complicated. A generation ago, far fewer women had to worry about how symptoms would affect their careers. Now, some working women joke with their colleagues about hot flashes while others, wary of the stereotype of a woman at the mercy of her hormones, say nothing. And the boomer propensity to postpone parenthood means that though some women in perimenopause are adjusting to an empty nest, others are still attending elementary school PTA meetings or even sitting beside the sandbox.

Whatever their situation, women have demonstrated a ravenous appetite for information about menopause, which has generated a wave of best-selling books, CD-ROMs, support groups, even specialized clinics. They're also questioning conventional practices, like HRT, and seeking other options. In Portland, OR, naturopathic physician Tori Hudson, N.D., opened an alternative clinic called A Woman's Time in 1995. Naturopaths, physicians, and a massage therapist offer herbal and nutritional therapies in addition to more standard medical treatments. "I opened the door," says Hudson, "and we were instantly full."

Accustomed to having control over their reproductive lives and their health care, boomer women learn not only from experts but also from one another. That's why the four women interviewed below agreed to say the M-word out loud.

Lynda Wachsteter always considered herself knowledgeable about health issues. She read a lot and questioned her doctors. Yet at the onset of perimenopause four years ago, when she was 49, Wachsteter felt bewildered. She was having hot flashes, was not sleeping well, often felt irritable and "down on everything," and was bothered by vaginal dryness.

What's more, she was frustrated by the many mixed messages she got about menopausal treatment. "You read these conflicting reports, and doctors tell you one thing, your friends another. There's just no consensus."

Twice, gynecologists prescribed hormones. And twice

## Learning to love menopause.

Wachsteter, a resident of Short Hills, NJ, and a part-time office administrator, balked at taking them because she disliked the side effects. "I felt awful--tense, agitated, bloated," she remembers. "And I'm stubborn, I guess. I hate this idea that menopause is an illness you can cure with pills."

Wachsteter put together a personal grab bag of menopausal therapies, including vitamins, evening primrose oil, and other health-food store concoctions. When her cholesterol climbed, she lost ten pounds through Weight Watchers. Regular dog-walking helps her burn off calories and relieve stress. She schedules every-other-month massages.

It was helpful to have the comfort of a long, supportive marriage, especially since Wachsteter missed her two 20-something sons, who had graduated from college and moved out west. Her husband of 31 years "never made light of my symptoms," she says. "He reminded me to drink all the water I was supposed to. He didn't make demands on me when I was stressed out. He's just there, a good friend."

Like many women, she's made some adjustments. After two years as president of a major charity, "I've pulled back a bit," she says. "I've learned to say no, to not rush out to a meeting if I don't have to be there." Yet her experience also illustrates the multiple pressures many women handle at midlife: Though she'd planned to take time off last summer "to do some things for myself," she wound up spending much of the time caring for her ailing mother.

Still, with her symptoms now ebbing, Wachsteter describes a sense of autonomy and self-knowledge that's a common refrain among postmenopausal women. "I know what works for me, what I don't want to waste time on," she says. "I don't think anything is 'over.' The future looks good."

Menopause has been pretty easy for me," says 54-year-old Felicity O'Meara, who edits computer manuals and technical guides in San Francisco. Wary of hormone therapy, she managed a variety of symptoms for four years with patience and pep talks instead of pills. It was, she says with some pride, "like weathering a mild but not inconsiderable storm."

She was 47 when she first noticed irregular periods and then very heavy ones. Next, she was hit by the sort of moodiness she vaguely recalled from adolescence. She could feel crushed by a trivial incident, "like someone not saying hello in the hallway at work. I'd feel slighted, even as my common sense said, 'This is nothing.'" She had hot flashes which were "annoying, but not as uncomfortable as

a bad pair of shoes." And she noticed her concentration faltering on occasion. "You know the spaced-out feeling of walking into a room and forgetting why you came in?"

Nevertheless, says O'Meara, "none of the symptoms was severe enough to send me to a doctor," so she coped on her own. "I told myself: Millions of women go through this. It's get-through-able."

While she was getting through, O'Meara made a point of being open, matter-of-fact, even lighthearted about menopause. "I wasn't on a crusade," she says. "I just didn't want to subscribe to the taboo." So she'd fan herself with a notebook at department meetings and remark, "Is it hot in here or am I having a hot flash?" Some people were amused, some embarrassed, some curious. Younger women wanted to know what hot flashes felt like. Like stepping out of an air-conditioned store on a broiling summer day O'Meara said.

She had her last period three years ago, and now says she feels "tougher, more mature" as well as "more ambitious than I have in a long time." It's difficult to say how much of this increased energy and confidence stems from the end of menopause and how much from a liberating life-cycle change: O'Meara's son, whom she raised as a single mother, is a college freshman now, with his own apartment. "Being a mother is a full-time job," she reflects. "Now I have more space in my life."

So after living in California for more than 20 years, she's been spending a lot of time in Illinois, where she grew up and still has close friends. She's hoping to work and establish homes in both San Francisco and Illinois. It's a challenging goal, but, then, challenge is the point. "I conceived this plan as an adventure," O'Meara says. "I feel I can go out and do anything."

She was managing, Libbi Lepow told herself, as the first major symptoms arrived three years ago, when she was 46. True, she felt she had to keep her hot flashes to herself at the staid Newtown Square, PA, company where she worked in human resources. At meetings, redfaced and sweaty, she hoped no one would notice when she peeled off her blazer. Still, although early perimenopause was "physically uncomfortable, it never stopped me from doing what I had to do."

What alarmed her was her sudden emotional volatility. Two winters ago, her 12-year-old son would spill milk, "and I'd go into a screaming fit. A client would ask me to change something and I'd barely make it back to my office before I'd start throwing things. That's not my style."

Worse, Lepow sank into a depression. Recent studies

## Learning to love menopause.

indicate that the majority of menopausal women don't experience depression, and many who do have had prior episodes. For Lepow, however, this was new. Though she'd had a long-unsatisfying marriage, "I'd never before felt I couldn't do something to help myself."

Over several weeks, fearing that she might never regain her sense of self, she had suicidal thoughts. "I remember calmly thinking, If this goes on, I'm going to drive my car into a wall." Luckily, when Lepow expressed her despair during a women's-only computer conference, someone suggested her feelings might be hormonal and made her promise to call her gynecologist.

Lepow did. After she and her doctor discussed the pros and cons of HRT, she began taking Premarin and Provera, an estrogen and progestin combination. A week and a half later, Lepow's depression lifted and the hot flashes stopped. And just in time--on the day she began the HRT regimen, she learned of a job opening in San Francisco, a city she'd always yearned to live in. She applied for the position, which set in motion a series of changes that have transformed her life.

Though lots of women go through a period of reassessment at midlife, Lepow's was particularly dramatic. Suffering through menopause, she believes, "made me feel even more lonely" in her already troubled marriage. "I was vastly more needy, and my husband was too involved with his own problems."

When she landed the job as vice president of a financial services company ("a huge promotion") and moved to the Bay Area in 1995, she also filed for divorce. Along with her new home and new job, she now has a new boyfriend, a graphic design artist. Lepow reports that she's noticed "no letup in my sex drive. This is the most emotionally and sexually satisfying relationship I've ever had."

In retrospect, the sense of renewal she experienced after her menopausal depression lifted helped fuel her desire to start afresh, Lepow thinks. "When I came out on the other side, I felt so good," she says. "It was almost as if I'd gotten another chance to be me."

In retrospect, Kitty Dubin, 52, a Birmingham, MI, psychotherapist and playwright, confesses she wasn't racing reality. Although she had been menstruating irregularly for many months, when she first missed a period entirely two years ago, she took a home pregnancy test. The result was negative, and Dubin lectured herself, "Hey -- you're fifty years old and using birth control. This must be menopause."

She started talking to older female friends, then initiated an

informal weekly support group with two neighbors. "All of us were going through some aspect of The Change," she says, "and we had similar feelings." For about a year, they discussed their emptying nests, their elderly parents, their marriages or relationships, and their hormones.

Dubin was troubled less by the occasional hot flash and disrupted sleep than by irritability and moodiness. Her husband and teenage son had grown accustomed to her usual PMS. "I used to say 'Hey, it's day twenty-six, put on your helmets.' We'd laugh about it," she says. In perimenopause, however, such "hormonal shenanigans" occurred with unsettling unpredictability. She also disliked the mental fuzziness that left her fumbling for the name of some common object. She's begun HRT, experimenting with different drugs and dosages; it hasn't been a cure-all, but it's helped.

Yet her sense of going through "an enormous transition," one intensified by her only child's departure for college, remains. "You become aware of your own mortality: You know that you no longer have your whole life ahead of you," explains Dubin. "I did a lot of soul-searching."

Such reassessments are common among menopausal women all around her. Friends who'd built their lives around their children have gone charging back to work or school while friends who'd had frantic professional lives are opting for more quiet. They appear to be filling in whatever blanks they'd left as they careered through their 30s and 40s.

Dubin herself, happy with her life but wanting a better balance, has done some fine-tuning. She felt she hadn't made time for her community; she now serves on a committee at the public library. And she and her husband went to Vermont last summer. They had gone there annually, early in their marriage; "it was an important and special part of our relationship." But after they became parents, the trip became difficult. When they returned this time, "it was a reminder of the carefree days," she says. "It was wonderful."

Dubin doesn't feel finished with this phase. "A transition means some struggle, some search, perhaps some discomfort," she says. She's heard the phrase "postmenopausal zest," and notes drolly that she's not feeling very zesty yet. She does feel more independent, less concerned about approval from others. "In the past, I wasn't so sure about my choices," she says. "Now, if the population of Michigan says I should do A, but I want to do B, I do B. I care less about what others think. And that's cool."