

# Women's Health

Women have many unique health needs. As you grow older these needs may change. Three common health concerns for women are described below.

## Menopause

Menopause is the point in time when a woman's menstrual periods stop. Menopause happens because the ovaries stop making certain hormones. Once you have gone through menopause, you can't get pregnant anymore. The average age of menopause is 51, but for some women it happens as early as 40 or as late as 55.



Menopause affects every woman differently. Some women have no symptoms, but some women have changes in several areas of their lives. It's not always possible to tell if these changes are related to aging, menopause, or both. Some changes that might start in the years around menopause include:

### Hot Flashes

A sudden feeling of heat in the upper part or all of your body. Your face and neck may become red. Red blotches may appear on your chest, back, and arms. Heavy sweating and cold shivering can follow.

### Trouble sleeping

### Vaginal and urinary problems

The walls of your vagina may get drier and thinner because of lower levels of the hormone estrogen. You also could have more vaginal infections or urinary tract infections. Some women find it hard to hold their urine long enough to get to the bathroom (which is called urinary urge incontinence). Urine might also leak out when you sneeze, cough, or laugh (called urinary stress incontinence).

### Mood swings

### Changing feelings about sex

Some women feel less aroused, while others feel more comfortable with their sexuality after menopause. Some women may be less interested in sex because sex can be more physically uncomfortable.

### Osteoporosis

This is a condition in which your bones get thin and weak. It can lead to loss of height and broken bones.

Some women worry about menopause, and it can cause uncomfortable symptoms. But there are many ways to treat symptoms and stay active and strong. Work with your provider to feel comfortable and take good care of your health.

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## Cervical Cancer

Cervical cancer is a disease that can be very serious. It happens when normal cells in the cervix change into cancer cells. Cervical cancer is most often caused by *human papillomavirus* or HPV. Fortunately there are two kinds of vaccines that can protect girls and young women against this virus. They are called *Cervarix* and *Gardasil*. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend that all girls aged 11 and 12 get three doses (shots) of either vaccine to protect against HPV. Girls and young women ages 13 through 26 should get all 3 doses of an HPV vaccine if they have not received all doses yet.



Another important tool to prevent cervical cancer is the Pap Test. This test looks for cells in the cervix that could turn into cancer if not treated. The National Cancer Institute makes the following recommendations for the Pap test:

- *Begin Screening:* 3 years after becoming sexually active or at age 21, whichever comes first
- *Continue Screening:* at least every 3 years until age 65



## Breast Cancer

Breast cancer is the second most common cancer in American women. About 1 in 8 women will find out that she has breast cancer at some point in her life. Fortunately, with early detection and treatment most women with breast cancer survive it.

The best way to detect breast cancer as early as possible is through regular clinical breast exams – an exam done by your provider – and high quality “mammograms.” A mammogram is a type of x-ray that examines the breast for changes that are not normal. The National Cancer Institute makes the following recommendations for mammograms:

- Women 40 years and older should get a mammogram every 2 years.
- Women who have had breast cancer or other breast problems or who have a family history of breast cancer might need to start getting mammograms before age 40. They might also need to get them more often. Talk to your provider about when to start and how often you should have a mammogram.

Sources:

“Cervical Cancer” and “Breast Cancer”  
National Cancer Institute, [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)

US Dept. of Health and Human Services on Women’s Health,  
[www.womenshealth.gov](http://www.womenshealth.gov)

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