

BETTER WAYS

Better labeling on gluten-free foods. Some foods labeled “gluten-free” have contained enough gluten (a protein found in wheat, barley and rye) to trigger symptoms in sensitive people. Now: Breads, cereals and other foods with “gluten-free,” “no gluten,” “free of gluten” and “without gluten” on the label must have less than 20 parts per million of gluten (the smallest amount that can be reliably measured). In people with celiac disease, gluten causes cramping, bloating and diarrhea—and can even lead to osteoporosis, malnutrition and intestinal cancer. The only treatment is to avoid gluten. Millions of people are also gluten-sensitive and suffer intestinal cramping, diarrhea, headaches, fatigue and other symptoms.

Margaret A. Hamburg, MD, FDA Commissioner, Silver Spring, Maryland.

Better approach for small kidney tumors. *New study:* Among 5,650 adults (age 66 and older) with kidney malignancies smaller than two inches, those whose tumors were monitored (with imaging tests, for example) had a significantly lower risk of suffering a heart attack or other cardiovascular event after five years than those whose tumors were surgically removed. Risk for death from kidney cancer was similar between the two groups. *Theory:* Surgery may not be best for older patients with other health conditions—especially those with cardiovascular disease, which puts them at greater risk for heart attack and stroke during and after surgery.

William C. Huang, MD, assistant professor of urologic oncology, New York University Langone Medical Center, New York City.

Better weight-loss strategy. If you're trying to lose weight, don't let others pressure you. In a new study of 1,300 adults ages 20 to 31, more than 40% had used unhealthy diet tactics, including fasting and substituting smoking for eating. Nearly half said a significant other had encouraged them to lose weight. Binge eating was nearly twice as common in this group versus those who weren't pressured to lose weight.

Marla E. Eisenberg, ScD, MPH, associate professor of pediatrics, University of Minnesota Medical School, Minneapolis.

Machelle Seibel, MD

University of Massachusetts Medical School
My Menopause Magazine

Dangers of Early Menopause

It increases your risk for heart attack, dementia and other serious conditions...

For the average woman in the US, menopause occurs between the ages of 45 and 55. But what if it happens earlier than that?

Up to 5% of American women do reach menopause earlier than normal—due, for example, to genetics, chemotherapy, surgical removal of the ovaries or a seemingly unrelated condition such as an autoimmune disease (see details below).

What's new: A growing body of evidence is now uncovering dangers associated with early menopause. Fortunately, research is showing that there are steps that women can take to protect themselves.

WHY MENOPAUSE HAPPENS EARLY

A woman is said to have reached menopause when a year has passed since her last menstrual period. The same symptoms that occur with regular menopause usually are present with early menopause, such as hot flashes, decreased sex drive, vaginal dryness and sleep problems.

When menopause comes early because of genetics or an autoimmune disorder, it's a specific medical condition—doctors call it *primary ovarian insufficiency*. Decreased activity of the ovaries causes a drop in estrogen that leads to menopause. Autoimmune diseases that can trigger early menopause include thyroid disease, rheumatoid arthritis and lupus, among others.

Medical treatments also can cause early menopause. Women who undergo surgical removal of the ovaries experience menopause right away.



Chemotherapy and pelvic radiation can damage the ovaries, resulting in menopause that occurs earlier than normal.

Another area of study: Scientists also are learning more about a link between environmental toxins and early menopause. Smoking—and exposure to cigarette smoke—has been found to promote early menopause by damaging the ovarian cells that release estrogen. Women who smoke should do their best to stop. Research shows that female smokers start menopause an average of two years earlier than nonsmokers.

Talk to your doctor: If your periods have stopped and you're also experiencing weight loss, dizziness or low blood pressure, you may need a test for Addison's disease—a condition that affects the adrenal glands and is associated with about 3% of cases of primary ovarian insufficiency.

STAY SAFE AFTER MENOPAUSE

For the majority of women, the dangers of early menopause can be nearly eliminated with the use of supplemental estrogen, along with lifestyle approaches...

Bottom Line/Health interviewed Machelle Seibel, MD, a professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester. He is editor in chief of *My Menopause Magazine* and coauthor, with Karen Giblin, of *Eat to Defeat Menopause: The Essential Nutrition Guide for a Healthy Midlife* (Da Capo Lifelong).



HEALTH DISCOVERIES

■ **THANKS, SIS!** Grown children from large families are less likely to get divorced than those who had no siblings. *Theory:* Living with multiple siblings improves interaction and communication skills. ■ **A**



LIFESAVING SMELL! Cancer cells in the bladder emit scent molecules that can be detected with the *OdoReader*, an experimental device that could lead to the earlier detection and treatment of bladder cancer. ■ **CHECK YOUR NIGHT-LIGHT** if you're feeling blue.

Animals exposed to blue light at night are more likely to have depression-like symptoms than those exposed to red light—and both fare worse than those exposed to *no* light. ■ **BACTERIA IN THE MOUTH** are also abundant in gut

adenomas, benign tumors that can turn malignant over time. It's thought that inflammation from *fusobacteria* can trigger cancerous changes. The findings may lead to more effective ways to prevent and treat colon cancer.



■ **HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS HAVE LONGER LIVES.** Jewish men who survived the Holocaust live about 14 months longer than those who didn't go through it. *Theory:* Intense physical and psychological trauma can lead to *posttraumatic growth*, an improvement in subsequent life skills. Life expectancies weren't longer for female survivors. ■ **WHEN TESTOSTERONE DROPS ABRUPTLY**, Parkinson's-like symptoms may occur, according to animal research. This suggests that men who maintain normal testosterone in later life may be more resistant to the



disease. ■ **FULL MOON INTERRUPTS SLEEP.** *New study:* Activity in the brain area related to deep sleep dropped by 30% during a full moon. People

took longer to fall asleep and slept about 20 minutes less.

■ The Ohio State University ■ *PLOS ONE*
■ *The Journal of Neuroscience* ■ *Cell Host & Microbe* ■ University of Haifa ■ *The Journal of Biological Chemistry* ■ *Current Biology*

• **Heart attack and stroke.** Menopause that occurs even at a normal age increases heart disease risk—the decline in estrogen causes about a 10% boost in LDL “bad” cholesterol, reduces the ability of the coronary arteries to expand and contract and hastens the development of atherosclerosis.

Important study: Women who experienced early menopause were found to be twice as likely to suffer from a heart attack or stroke as those with a later menopause.

My advice: Follow a cholesterol-lowering diet—include plenty of fish, vegetables and whole grains and limit red meat and other foods high in saturated fat. Also, exercise regularly (ideally, for at least 30 minutes, most days of the week).

Also: Be sure to get your cholesterol tested every one to two years. If it's high, your doctor may recommend niacin and/or a statin medication, such as *simvastatin* (Zocor).

• **Memory loss/dementia.** “Brain fog”—a common complaint among menopausal women of all ages—appears to be temporary, but there is another, more serious risk.

Important finding: Women who experience early menopause have nearly twice the risk of developing dementia as women whose menopause comes later.

My advice: Don't delay estrogen therapy. Research shows that women who start estrogen replacement within five years of menopause (the earlier the better), and continue to take it for 10 years or more, are about one-third less likely to get Alzheimer's than those who avoid estrogen until later in life. Despite well-publicized research that found dangers associated with *hormone-replacement therapy* (HRT) several years ago, there are safe ways for most women to use it (see box at right).

• **Osteoporosis.** Your risk of developing osteoporosis is roughly doubled if you have early menopause. When estrogen declines, the rate at which your bones break down outpaces your body's ability to build new bone.

My advice: After menopause, eat plenty of high-calcium foods, such as leafy greens and low-fat dairy. Postmenopausal women need a daily total of 1,200 mg of calcium (from food and supplements).

They should also get their vitamin D levels tested and take vitamin D supplements, if needed, as directed by their doctors. Vitamin D is just as important as calcium for healthy bones.

Remember: Weight-bearing exercises, such as walking, tennis and weight-training, are keys to building and maintaining bone density.

More from Dr. Seibel...

Early Menopause and Estrogen

It has been more than a decade since a high-profile study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) reported that *hormone-replacement therapy* (HRT) increases risk for heart disease, stroke, breast cancer and pulmonary embolism (blood clots in the lungs).

After the study was reported, prescriptions for HRT, commonly used to help ease menopausal symptoms, dropped by 50%—and today millions of women still refuse HRT.

What most people don't realize: Many women in the JAMA study began HRT 12 years after menopause. Also, the increased risks linked to HRT use have been shown to mainly occur in women who took the hormone progestin along with estrogen.

If women start estrogen soon after early (or regular) menopause, research shows that they'll have lower risk for heart disease, Alzheimer's disease and osteoporosis than those who take it later in life.

My advice for women with early menopause: Consider taking estrogen for at least 10 years, but talk to your doctor to be sure estrogen's benefits outweigh any potential risks. An estrogen patch may be safer than the oral form. If you've missed the window for estrogen therapy, consult your doctor.