



Atlanta Magazine Questions
Peachtree Gynecology

2. When does menopause start? How can I tell if I am menopausal or perimenopausal? What is the difference? Should I take hormones?

Perimenopause is the transition when women's ovarian production begins to decline and eventually cease. During most women's reproductive life, most her hormone production follows a typical, predictable cyclic pattern. During perimenopause, which often begins in a woman's late thirties or early forties, the normal cyclic hormone production becomes more erratic and ovulation is less frequent. Common symptoms during this time can be mood swings, irritability, trouble sleeping, trouble concentrating, bloating, water retention, as well as the typical hot flashes or night sweats. PMS tends to accelerate and weight gain is also common during this time, as metabolism tends to slow down and insulin resistance tends to increase. Menstrual cycles during this time may be normal or erratic. It is also common for women to have several months of significant symptoms followed by several months of feeling completely "normal". Menopause is defined as the absence of a menstrual cycle for one year, so many of the symptoms that we address are during the perimenopause transition, which can last up to 10 years.

There are many lifestyle modifications and non-hormonal treatments for women experiencing perimenopausal and menopausal symptoms. However, sometimes these are just not effective enough. Women should look at their total quality of life when deciding whether to take hormone replacement therapy. The WHI study has made many women afraid of hormone therapy; however, subsequent studies in younger women starting through the menopause transition have not shown the same increased risks as seen in the WHI. There has been much publicity about bioidentical hormones being safer. Although the concept of bioidentical hormones is attractive, there is no good scientific evidence that they are any safer than traditional hormone therapy. Women should educate themselves and partner with their healthcare provider to determine their own healthcare plan; individualized therapy is now the norm.