

Menopause Foundation
of Canada

The Silence and the Stigma: Menopause in Canada

Message from the Board

There are an estimated 10 million women over the age of 40¹ in Canada, making up more than one-quarter of the population. Despite the size of this cohort, their health care and societal needs related to menopause – a natural yet complex transition experienced by all women – have largely been ignored.

While we've done a great deal to normalize periods, pregnancy, post-partum depression and other realities of being a woman, menopause remains taboo. In our ageist world, menopause is overwhelmingly viewed as negative and remains shrouded in secrecy. As a result of the silence, far too many women are unprepared for this stage of life. This has a negative impact on their health, their relationships, their work and their overall quality of day-to-day living.

The Menopause Foundation of Canada was created to break the silence and the stigma of menopause. Together with a Medical Advisory Board comprised of many of Canada's leading menopause specialists, we are starting a national conversation to bring menopause to the forefront in our country.

Why it Matters

There are more than 30 symptoms of menopause, which often start in women in their 40s and can continue to the end of their life. The symptoms often impact women's physical, mental and emotional well being. Menopause marks the beginning of a change in hormones that increase the risk for osteoporosis, heart disease and many genitourinary issues that get worse over time if not managed appropriately. There are preventive measures and safe and effective treatments available, but women remain generally unaware of these options. That's because support for menopause through our healthcare system, our workplaces and society has been overlooked.

We believe women in the prime of their lives should not be blindsided by menopause. Equally important, their symptoms should not be minimized, ignored or undertreated. Some people say we should not talk about this subject. This is a private journey, it's natural, women just need to get on with it. Some worry that talking about it will make women look weak.

We believe women deserve to feel healthy. We believe women deserve to perform at their highest level at work. We believe women deserve to contribute to society in ways that are meaningful to them.

Women need the knowledge to understand the physical changes they are going through and the long-term health impacts of menopause. Women need to understand the options available to them to be able to manage their menopause their way. Our health professionals need to be better educated about menopause, resulting in confidence to properly assess, provide care and offer treatment. Workplaces need to be menopause inclusive. Society needs to check its ageist attitudes about getting older so we can normalize open discussion for all.

Our hope is that the data in this report starts a national conversation that leads to concrete action to address the inequities faced by women in the prime of their lives. We invite you to join us.

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The Menopause Foundation of Canada's Medical Advisory Board

The Menopause Foundation of Canada thanks its Medical Advisory Board, comprised of many of Canada's leading menopause specialists, for their support. The Medical Advisory Board provides guidance on the Foundation's advocacy goals and public awareness campaigns. These clinical experts offer a front-line perspective on women's experience during menopause and direct the organization to the most current and relevant evidence-based health information.

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October, 2022

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Silence and the Stigma: Menopause in Canada

The Menopause Experience

The Menopause Foundation of Canada's landmark research of Canadian women aged 40 to 60 shows that among those going through perimenopause / menopause, more than half (54%) believe the topic is still taboo. A shocking one in two women (46%) feel unprepared for this stage of life. Even more remarkable, four in 10 women report feeling alone.

How can something that happens to more than 50% of the population be such a mystery?

The Menopause Knowledge Gap

While menopause is a natural stage of life, many women are suffering through it without basic knowledge of symptoms that can have a negative impact on their health and the quality of day-to-day living.

- Most women – 95% in our research – experience a range of menopausal symptoms.
- Awareness of the more than 30 symptoms of menopause is low.
- While the majority of women were aware of hot flashes (84%) and night sweats (77%), more than two-thirds did not know that urinary tract infections (82%), heart palpitations (75%), and pain during intercourse (66%) were menopausal symptoms.
- Six in 10 did not know that body aches (63%), headaches/migraines (58%), anxiety (58%), depression (56%), and memory issues (58%) were symptoms of perimenopause/menopause.

Women need information to allow them to understand what is happening to their bodies and why they may be feeling the way they do. Without this baseline knowledge, symptoms may be viewed in isolation and women may not be able to connect the dots and see the bigger picture of the transition they are going through. Complicating the issue is determining whether their symptoms are the result of another condition. Women in our survey reported experiencing an average of seven menopausal symptoms. With knowledge, they can determine what preventative care, lifestyle choices and evidence-based treatment options exist to help them live their best life through the menopausal years.

Health Equity

Women going through perimenopause/menopause see their family physician as their most trusted source of information and advice for menopause.

- Despite this trust, one-quarter (27%) report their family physician proactively discussed menopause with them.

- Of the 41% who decided to seek out medical advice themselves, 72% found that advice to be not helpful or only somewhat helpful.
- Four in 10 (38%) women felt their symptoms were undertreated.

The reality is that many primary care clinicians in Canada have had little experience treating menopausal patients.² Our healthcare partners need to consider what actions they can take to better support women during this time of their lives.

Workplace Equity

Women account for almost half the workforce in Canada, with more than five million working women over the age of 40.³ That means an estimated one-quarter of Canada's 19-million-person labour force are going through the menopause transition or are postmenopausal.

Almost two million working women in Canada are between the ages of 45 and 55, the age when most women reach menopause.

- There is deafening silence for this group in the workplace – our survey revealed that three-quarters of working women feel their employer is not supportive or do not know if they have support to help them manage this stage of life.
- Working women are dealing with the reality of ageism, with 3 in 10 fearing that others may see them as weak, old, or past their prime.
- 87% of survey respondents believe working women need support through all stages of life, including menopause, and a majority believe workplaces would benefit by doing so.

It is estimated that one in 10 women will leave the workforce due to their menopause.⁴

As companies look to improve diversity, equity and inclusion, it is time to focus on the needs of older women. We have made great strides dealing openly with other life changes, such as pregnancy. Like pregnancy, menopause is just another phase of life. The difference is pregnancy doesn't happen to every woman – menopause does.

Taking Action

We need to break the silence and the stigma of menopause. Normalizing this natural part of life is long overdue. Everyone has a role to play:

Women

Knowledge is power. Seek sources of evidence-based information to understand the hormonal changes affecting your body ([joining](#) the Menopause Foundation of Canada is a great start!). Every person has a different menopause experience and how they choose to navigate their menopause is a personal choice. Advocate for yourself with your healthcare provider. If you aren't getting the answers or the support you need, find a [qualified doctor](#) who specializes in menopause. You deserve to feel great in the prime of life.

Speak up and break the silence. Open conversation will break the stigma and the taboo of menopause. We normalize menopause by starting conversations with friends and family; making it okay to talk about menopause opens up a whole new network of support and will help women see that they are not alone.

Healthcare community

Deepen Your Knowledge of Menopause.

Menopause will impact half of your patients. They need your help. Ensure you have the most up to date evidence-based information on menopause. Information on menopause hormone therapy and other treatment options, hormonal and non-hormonal, have changed over the years. Be sure to read the new clinical practice guidelines on menopause from the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada and from the North American Menopause Society. Take one of the many continuing medical education courses on menopause. Refer your patients to a medical menopause specialist if you aren't comfortable helping your patients manage symptoms.

Be proactive and talk to your patients about menopause. Women see their healthcare practitioner as their most trusted resource for menopause advice, and they're counting on you to help them. Don't dismiss or ignore the symptoms women are experiencing; early awareness and discussion about various preventative care, lifestyle choices and evidence-based treatment options will help women make the right choices to manage their menopause in the way that works best for them.

Employers

Create menopause inclusive workplaces.

Foster an age and gender inclusive workplace by breaking the silence and the stigma of menopause. Take action to support women in the prime of their careers by offering education, ensuring a robust benefits plan and creating policies that are inclusive to the needs of menopausal women. Need advice? Reach out to the [Menopause Foundation of Canada](#).

Government

Support research in menopausal health. Mature women's health has been understudied in Canada, further hindering knowledge translation for clinicians providing care. Fund more research into this stage of life and become a global leader in this area.

Society

It's long-past time to normalize what is a normal part of every woman's life. Let's check our ageist attitudes and challenge the negative stereotypes of women getting older. Let's recognize that women are making significant contributions in their menopausal years and deserve respect and support. Let's demand better for the women around us.

The Menopause Foundation of Canada is a national, non-profit organization established in 2022 by a core group of women blindsided by their own menopause experience. They set out to create Canada's first national voice for women on this gender equity issue. This organization, guided by a Medical Advisory Board of leading menopause clinical specialists, is committed to closing the menopause knowledge gap, raising awareness to eliminate the social stigma of menopause, improving health equity, and working to create menopause inclusive workplaces.

“I have been treating menopausal women for decades and know the serious toll symptoms can take on their physical health, their mental health, their careers, their relationships and their overall quality of life. Menopause is seen as something women must endure, like a woman’s burden.

This is unacceptable.

Women deserve to feel healthy. They should not suffer in silence. There is preventative care, lifestyle choices, and safe and effective treatment options available to help them thrive during their menopausal years.”

— Dr. Wendy Wolfman, MD, FRCS(C), FACOG, NCMP, President of the Menopause Society of Canada, Director of the Menopause Clinic at Mount Sinai Hospital, first recipient of the Carol Mitchell Chair in Menopause.



MYTH

When your period stops you are in menopause and the transition is over.

FACT

Menopause is a continuum that includes three important stages that will last between one-third to one-half of an average woman's life: perimenopause, menopause and postmenopause. Menopause happens when a woman is period free for one year. Symptoms, physical changes and health risks occur throughout the continuum.

A typical woman enters perimenopause in her 40s, reaches menopause between the ages of 45 and 55 and remains in postmenopause for the rest of her life. With the significant postmenopausal drop in estrogen, a woman's risk for heart disease, osteoporosis and the genitourinary syndrome of menopause (GSM) increase.

Many people use the term "menopause" to refer to the entire menopause experience.

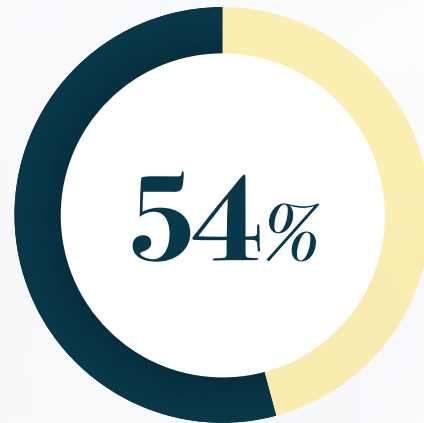
THE DATA

What Women Told Us

Menopause in Canada

The Menopause Foundation of Canada's landmark research of Canadian women going through the universal experience of perimenopause/menopause reveals the real-life impact and inequities women face during this stage of life.

Still taboo after all these years.



Menopause remains shrouded in secrecy. More than half of women believe the topic is still taboo.

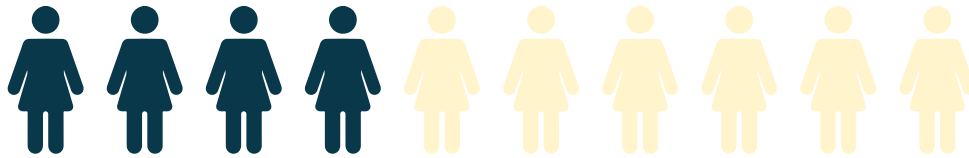
1 in 2

Women (46%) feel unprepared for perimenopause/menopause

55%

Wish they had learned about it earlier in life

This indicates the need for more education and awareness so the estimated 10 million women in Canada over the age of 40 who are menopausal (perimenopause/menopause/postmenopause) are well-informed.



4 in 10 women (38%) feel alone during menopause.

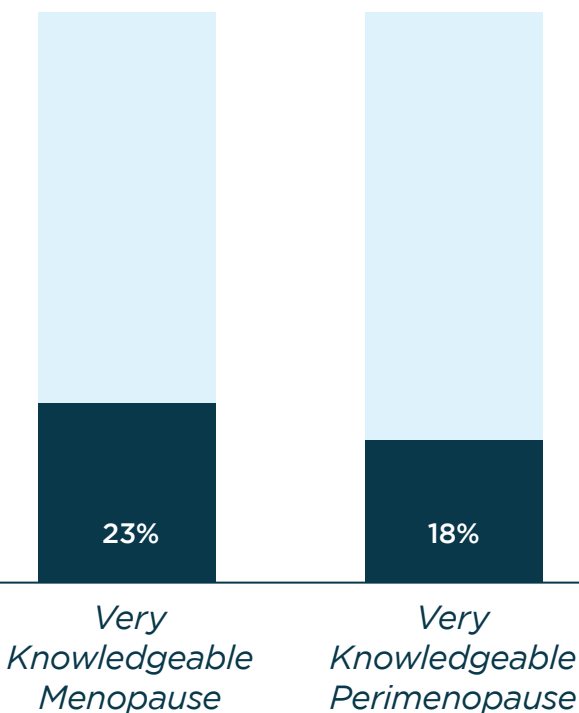
Perhaps the silence around menopause is why so many women feel alone. This isn't the case with other phases of a woman's life. Puberty is taught in school and is part of many coming-of-age stories. As for pregnancy and motherhood, there are many 'what to expect when expecting' books and a generous network of family, friends, and healthcare and community programs to support women. Many women aren't finding those same supports available as they go through menopause.

Survey respondents told us that aging for women is overwhelmingly viewed as negative in our society. This has resulted in menopause being a “lonely” experience for many women. Respondents also said they felt “shame” for not knowing what was happening to their bodies during menopause.

Summary of verbatim comments from survey participants.

The silence and stigma of menopause has left survey respondents feeling “lost” as they worked to solve the “mystery” of menopause.

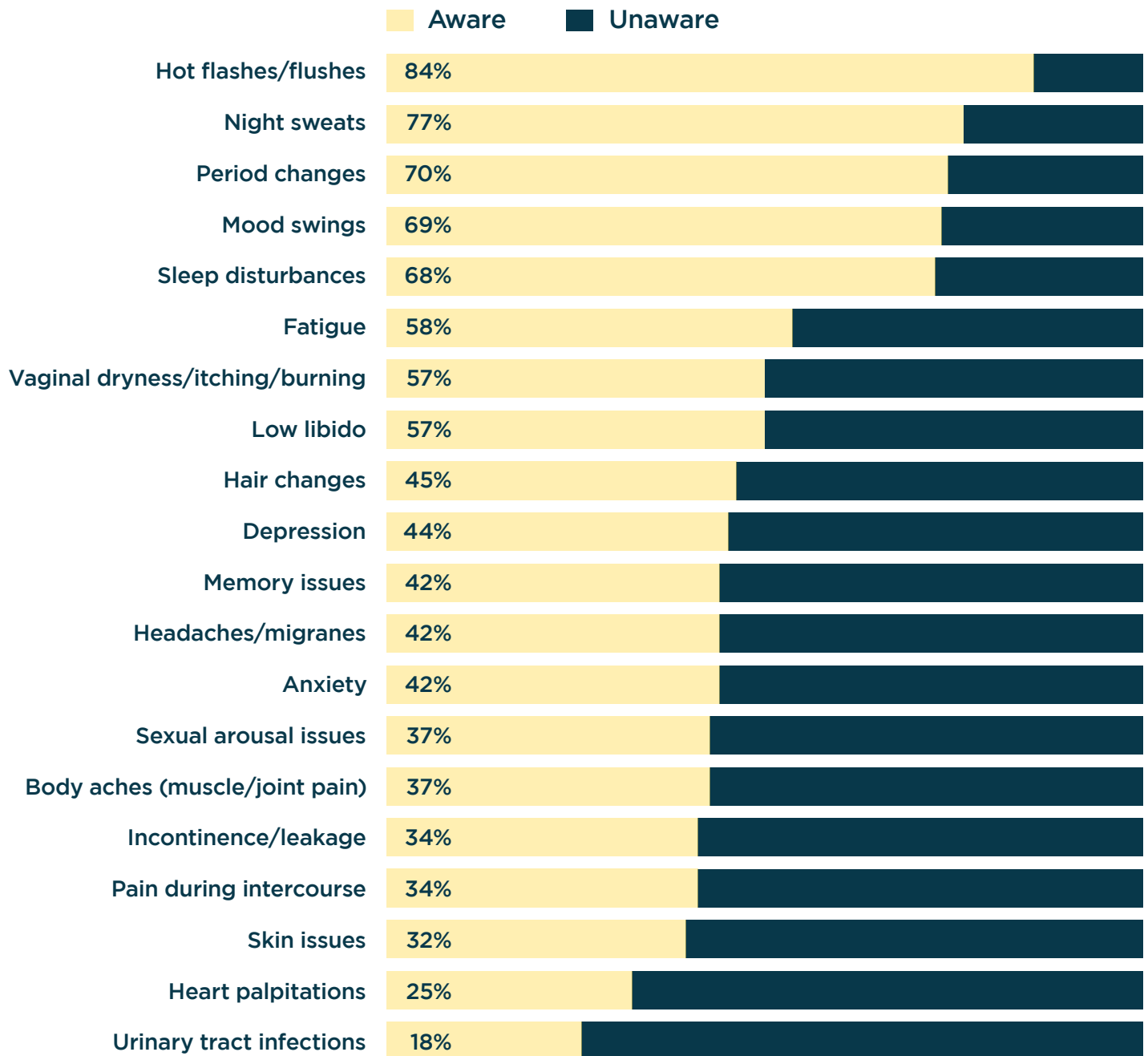
Summary of verbatim comments from survey participants.



Less than one-quarter of survey respondents believe they are very knowledgeable about the signs and symptoms of perimenopause and menopause.

Knowledge of Symptoms

There are more than 30 symptoms associated with the hormonal changes that occur through menopause. While many respondents were aware of common menopausal symptoms like hot flashes, night sweats and period changes, many other common symptoms had very low awareness.





MYTH
Hot flashes stop
once a woman
enters menopause.

FACT

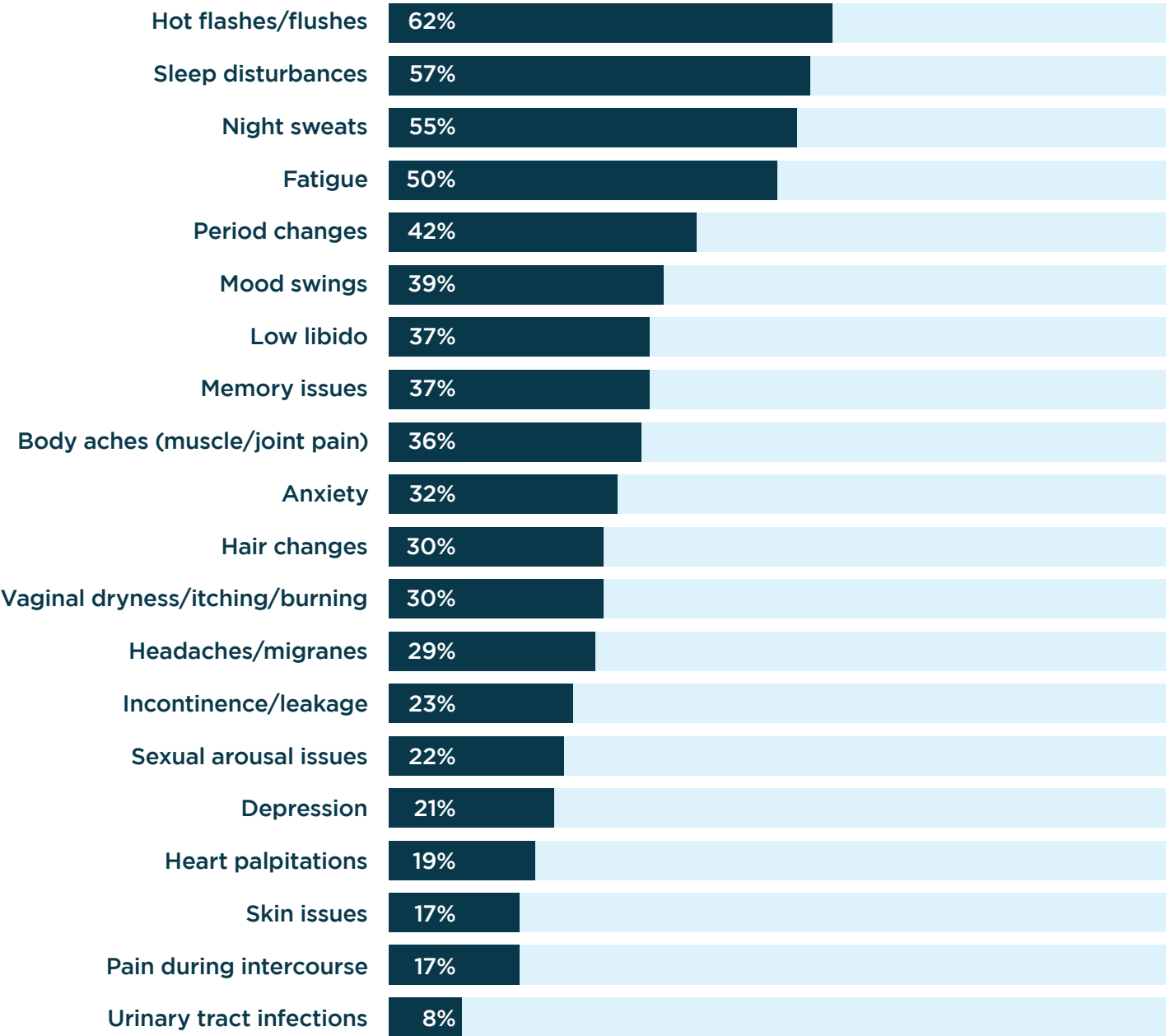
While hot flashes generally subside three to five years after menopause, in some women they persist for 15 years or more.

Up to 80% of women experience hot flashes during their menopausal years. These may occur dozens of times per day.

20% of women rate their hot flashes as being very severe and causing impairment.⁵

Experience of Symptoms

95% said they experienced menopausal symptoms with an average of seven symptoms reported.

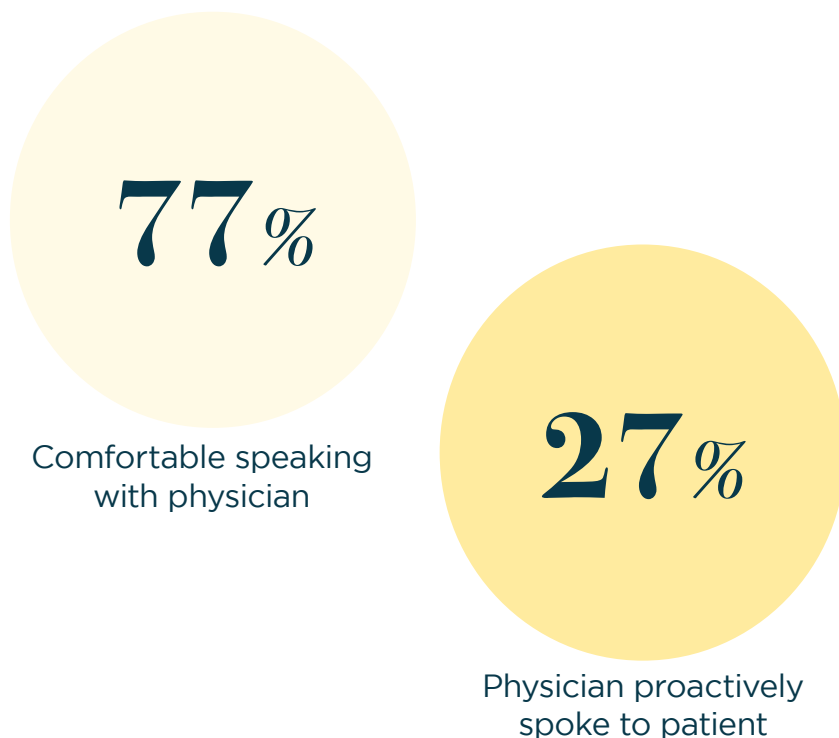


Health Equity for Women

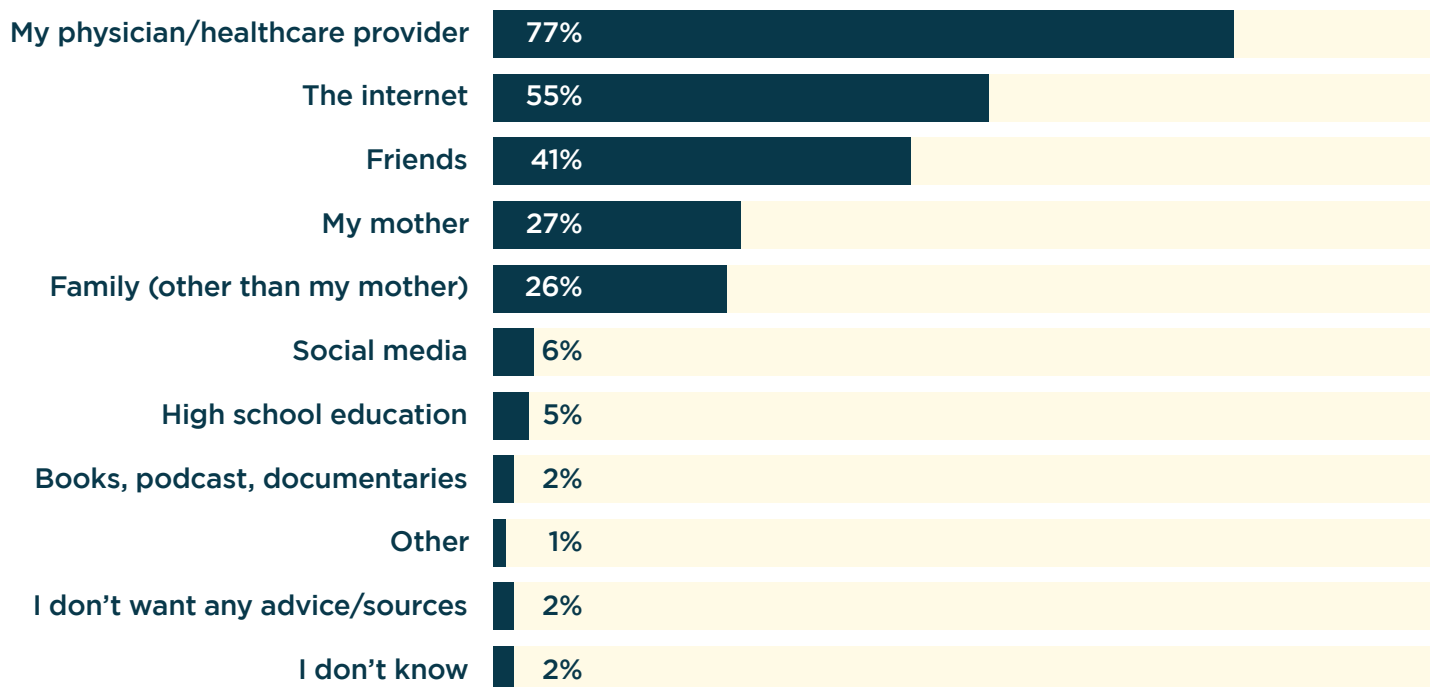
Women trust their healthcare providers and seek support and guidance from them during their menopausal years.

A physician was the preferred source of information and advice for perimenopause/menopause, beating out the internet, friends, family and social media. In a world where social media dominates, women still value their healthcare provider's expertise and guidance when it comes to menopause.

While three-quarters of women were comfortable talking about menopause to their physician, only one-quarter said their physician proactively spoke with them about it.



Preferred Sources of Advice and Information about Menopause



Respondents said they wanted doctors to take their symptoms “seriously” and not “minimize” or “brush off” the impact of menopause. Respondents value their healthcare provider and believe more education is needed for women and for physicians.

Summary of verbatim comments from survey participants.



Four in 10 women sought medical advice, but 72% found it to be not helpful or only somewhat helpful. Four in 10 (38%) felt their symptoms were undertreated.

Many primary care clinicians in Canada have had little experience treating menopausal patients. Guidelines and position statements, including those from the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada, the North American Menopause Society and the International Menopause Society, are available to support health care providers in understanding and caring for menopausal women. Additionally, many of these organizations provide continuing education courses for physicians.



Menopause and Relationships

Menopause is different for every woman. Some experience few symptoms with an easier transition, while others contend with multiple symptoms that can be severe and debilitating. One thing is certain, menopause can affect all aspects of life. In our research, 41% of women said their menopause symptoms negatively impacted their relationship with their partner or spouse.

Because of the silence and the stigma of menopause, and the reality that many women don't understand the transition they are going through, having an open conversation with an intimate partner can be difficult.

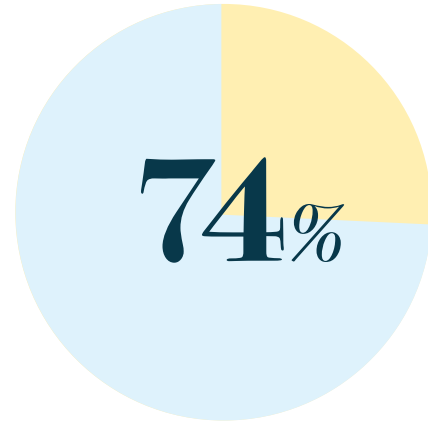
41%

Believe their menopausal symptoms negatively impacted their relationship with a spouse or partner

Menopause and the Workplace

Working women account for almost half the workforce in Canada, with more than five million working women over the age of 40. That means an estimated one-quarter of Canada's 19-million-person labour force are going through the menopause transition or are postmenopausal. Almost two million working women in Canada are between the ages of 45 and 55, the age when most women reach menopause.

As corporations look to improve diversity, equity and inclusion, attention to one of the largest segments of the workforce is long overdue.



Three-quarters (74%) of menopausal working women feel their employer is not supportive in helping them cope with their symptoms, or do not know if they have support.

“Weak, Old, or Past their Prime”

3 in 10

The stigma of menopause and the reality of ageism for working women may be contributing factors as to why 29% of survey respondents report fearing that others may see them as “weak, old, or past their prime”.

“Menopause often intersects with a critical career stage. It usually occurs between ages 45 and 55 — which is also the age bracket during which women are most likely to move into top leadership positions... If we want to continue to move the needle on the number of women in leadership roles and maintain their valuable contributions to a company’s bottom line, we need to be more open about what menopause is and how it affects both individuals and organizations.”

- Harvard Business Review, It’s Time to Start Talking About Menopause at Work. Feb. 24, 2020



87%

agree working women need support throughout all stages of life

77%

agree there should be more support in the workplace for women going through menopause

75%

agree that employers would benefit from offering these supports

Conclusion

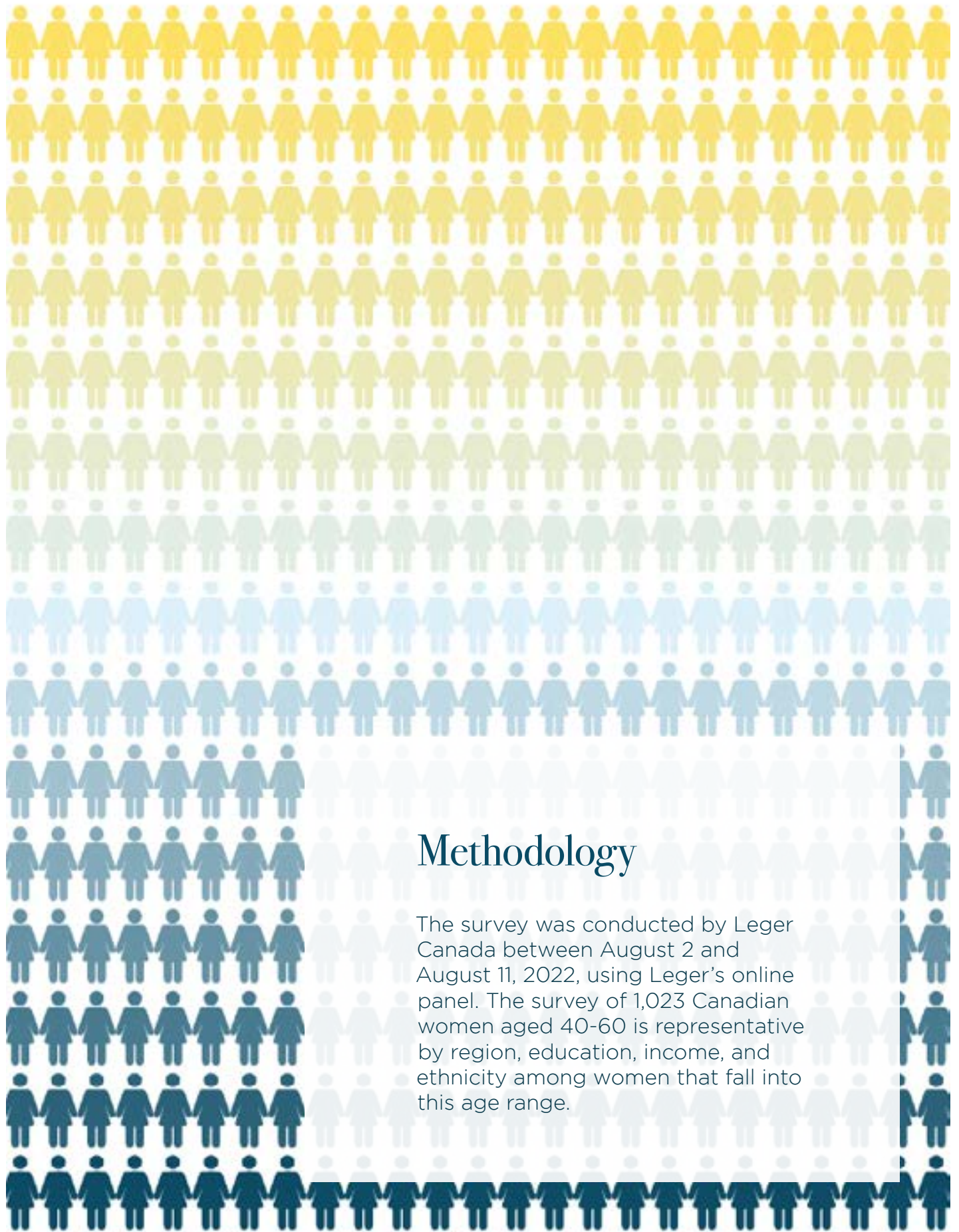
The Menopause Foundation of Canada's landmark research on Canadian women and menopause sheds much needed light on this important life transition. Women's healthcare and societal needs related to menopause have been overlooked. It's time to change *the change*.

Women deserve to feel healthy. This means they need the knowledge to recognize the symptoms of menopause, to understand the physical changes they are going through and to be aware of the long-term health impacts of menopause. Women need to know the options available to them to be able to manage their menopause their way. Our health professionals need to be better educated about menopause, resulting in the confidence to properly assess, provide care and offer treatment. Women deserve to perform at their highest level at work. This means workplaces need to be menopause inclusive. Women deserve to contribute to society in ways that are meaningful to them. This means society needs to check its ageist attitudes about getting older so we can normalize open discussion for all.

The data in this report is intended to help start a national conversation on menopause that leads to concrete action to address the inequities faced by women in the prime of their lives.

It's time to break the silence and the stigma of menopause.

This independent research report was made possible by supporters and volunteers, including educational funding from Lupin Pharma Canada, Organon, Astellas Pharma and Searchlight Pharma.



Methodology

The survey was conducted by Leger Canada between August 2 and August 11, 2022, using Leger's online panel. The survey of 1,023 Canadian women aged 40-60 is representative by region, education, income, and ethnicity among women that fall into this age range.

THE STAGES OF MENOPAUSE

Menopause is a natural phase of life that is often described as puberty in reverse or as *the change*. During menopause a woman's ovaries stop producing eggs, which results in falling levels of the hormones estrogen and progesterone. Menopause is a continuum that includes three important stages that will last between one-third to one-half of an average woman's life: perimenopause, menopause and postmenopause.

Perimenopause

Perimenopause is the time leading up to menopause and can last anywhere from six to eight years.⁶ During perimenopause estrogen and progesterone levels fluctuate – sometimes dramatically – leading to many symptoms that can have a negative impact on one's health and quality of life. Most women are in perimenopause between the ages of 40 and 50.

Menopause

Menopause is a milestone that happens when a woman has not had a menstrual period for one year. 51 is the average age of menopause in Canada, with most women reaching menopause between the ages of 45 and 55.

Early Menopause

An early menopause is considered to occur between the ages of 40 and 45 years old, and a late menopause between 55 and 60. Going through menopause before the age of 40 is described as premature menopause.

- 1 in 100 women go through menopause before the age of 40
- 1 in 1,000 before the age of 30
- 1 in 10,000 before the age of 20





Surgical and Medical Menopause

Menopause occurs immediately if both ovaries are surgically removed (bilateral oophorectomy). Surgery to remove the uterus (hysterectomy) does not cause menopause if the ovaries are left in place, although periods will stop. Women who have had a hysterectomy will start menopause two to three years earlier, on average, than women who have not. Surgical menopause can cause menopausal symptoms that are more frequent and severe than those experienced during natural menopause.⁷ Medical menopause can be caused by chemotherapy, radiation or ovarian suppression therapy.

Postmenopause

Every day after reaching menopause is considered postmenopause. Women are postmenopausal for the rest of their lives; many perimenopausal symptoms tend to subside in women several years after menopause, but for others they can continue for decades. With the significant postmenopausal drop in estrogen, a woman's risk for heart disease, osteoporosis and the genitourinary syndrome of menopause (GSM) increase. Menopause is often used to describe the postmenopausal phase as people will often say "I'm in menopause."

For more information about the stages of menopause and postmenopausal health risks, visit [MenopauseFoundationCanada.ca/resources](https://www.menopausefoundationcanada.ca/resources).

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³ Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0018-01 Labour force characteristics by sex and detailed age group, annual, inactive (x 1,000) DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25318/1410001801-eng>

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⁷ O'Brien K, Uzelac A, Lim J, Christakis M, Shirreff L. Surgical Menopause. *Gynaecology Quality Improvement Collaboration*: v12.22.2021.