

THE SECRET PLEASURES OF MENOPAUSE

Also by Christiane Northrup, M.D.

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in consultation with

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Introduction

A Brief Overview— What Is Menopause?

As an obstetrician-gynecologist with more than 30 years of experience on the front lines of women's health, I'm very familiar with everything that can go wrong with the female body. In fact, I've written three books on this topic that have provided women of all ages with a blueprint for changing their perceptions about their bodies as a first step toward better health.

As part of my own midlife rebirth, I've decided to dedicate the second half of my life to teaching women everything that can go *right* with their bodies, including how to experience more pleasure than they've ever dreamed possible. Given our cultural conditioning that we're over the hill at 50 and our

best years are behind us, this information is indeed a liberating secret!

The truth is that women over 50 are just hitting their stride. Fifty marks the beginning of the best years of our lives, including the best sex of our lives. As a specialist in women's gynecologic health, I want to get the word out that our bodies were designed to experience unlimited pleasure—and that experiencing this pleasure regularly is part of being vibrantly healthy at any age.



You probably already know what perimenopause and menopause are—and you may be all too familiar with many of the symptoms and physical changes that accompany this life-changing time! But let's briefly review a few main ideas just to reinforce what you already know and also what you can expect.

Menopause (from the Greek words *meno*, meaning “month” or “menses,” and *pausis*, meaning “pause”) means “the final menstrual period.” The average age for women to reach their last period is about 52, but some women go through it as early as 40 and some as late as 58 (give or take a few years). The transitional process leading up to the final

menstrual period is called *perimenopause* (from the Greek word *peri*, meaning “around” or “near”).

What menopause is *not* is a medical crisis or disorder. Don’t worry! Menopause and perimenopause are part of a natural process that involves a gradual change from the ability to conceive and birth a baby to the end of the normal reproductive phase of a woman’s life. Since this process lasts on average anywhere from 6 to 13 years, most of us think of it as a stage of life instead of an event. Even so, the official definition of menopause is the point in time when our periods stop permanently. Although most of us were certain of the exact day in adolescence when our periods started, we have no way of knowing when we’ve had our very last period until an entire year has passed. (Of course, women who’ve had hysterectomies know the exact date immediately!)

This transition is caused by changes in the brain and body that affect hormone levels, although not all of our hormones decline at the same rate during this time. Estrogen levels actually remain pretty much the same until some time in the final year of the transition, although what does change is the type of estrogen our bodies make. Although they continue to produce some *estradiol*, starting in perimenopause, they shift to making relatively more

estrone (which is produced both in the ovaries as well as body fat throughout a woman's life, with the exact amount varying a great deal between women).

Although we tend to think of estrogen as the only missing hormone after menopause, the truth is that in many women, progesterone and/or testosterone are often too low as well. Testosterone may or may not decrease; in some women, it actually rises. Progesterone, however, does drop during perimenopause, causing many of the most troublesome symptoms. Progesterone supplementation (with natural, not synthetic progesterone) often helps during early perimenopause when symptoms such as irritability and headaches are primarily related to estrogen dominance. It also helps prevent hot flashes in the latter stages of menopause, probably because progesterone is a precursor hormone that the body can make into estrogen. And it can also relieve angina (chest pain from the heart).

Although for some women, menopausal symptoms are quite bothersome (to say the least), other women seem to sail through the menopausal transition without much of a problem. In either case, the symptoms won't last forever. They're at their height during perimenopause and then taper off and usually disappear altogether within a year or so after the last period.

A Range of Symptoms

Here's a rundown of the most common symptoms reported during "the change," although please keep in mind that certainly not all women experience all of them:

— *Irregular periods* are the first sign that the menopausal transition has begun, which typically happens anywhere from two to eight years before a woman's last menstrual period. In fact, women who have previously been as regular as clockwork may go for several months without a period. Even though these irregular periods are a signal that you aren't ovulating every month, that doesn't mean you aren't ovulating *at all*. You may still get pregnant at any time until you reach your one-year mark without a period, so be sure to use birth control if having a baby at this time in your life isn't your intention. Believe me, it happens! Furthermore, pregnancy over the age of 50 increases the risk for both the mother and baby.

— *Lighter or heavier flow during periods* are both common.

— *Hot flashes* are the most common perimenopausal symptom, experienced to some degree by up to 85 percent of women. This symptom is at its height near the end of perimenopause. Many women also have night sweats severe enough to wake them, regularly disrupting their sleep. (Night sweats tend to occur between 3 and 4 A.M. for most women, although those who stay up very late at night or who work night shifts may experience a different pattern.)

Hot flashes and night sweats are more severe in women who are under emotional stress, as well as in women who eat a diet high in simple sugars and refined carbohydrates (found in baked goods, candy, white bread, white potatoes, white pasta, wine, liquor, and beer). They are also far more common in women who've had hysterectomies—with or without ovary removal.

— *Mood swings*, such as irritability and depression, are also typical hallmarks of perimenopause. These are especially troublesome for women who previously experienced mood swings before their periods.

— *Insomnia*, even without night sweats, can occur at this time.

— *Fuzzy thinking* (or “cotton head”) isn’t a sign that dementia is right around the corner, as some women fear, but rather a temporary effect of the hormonal changes of perimenopause. These changes include difficulty concentrating as well as minor forgetfulness. The situation is similar to the mental fuzziness many women experience after giving birth. “Cotton head” is designed to turn your attention inward so that you can focus on yourself for a change!

— *Heart palpitations* during the menopausal transition are experienced by women with higher levels of stress hormones caused by, among other things, greater levels of fear and anxiety. Often, this arises from past trauma that you now have the strength to resolve once and for all. (Heart palpitations can also be a sign of thyroid imbalance.) Chest pain (angina) can also occur and is related both to stress hormones and lack of progesterone.

— *Migraines* may occur more often in perimenopause, usually (but not always) in women who previously experienced migraines in the days before their period. These are often triggered by falling progesterone levels.

— *Breast tenderness* can also occur more frequently in women who previously experienced it premenstrually. (Breast tenderness is often a sign of iodine deficiency, too.)

— *Bone loss* can be a problem, especially for women who don't eat a healthy diet and don't exercise. (Bone loss is also a sign of vitamin D deficiency.) All women should have their vitamin D levels checked.

— *Hypothyroidism* that often has no overt symptoms and can only be diagnosed with proper testing occurs in up to one quarter of women at this time. In many women, this is caused by iodine deficiency. To test whether you may have it, just paint a patch of ammonium iodide (known as Iosol) on your wrist in the morning (it's available at www.TPCSDirect.com). (In dark-skinned women, put it on an area where skin is lightest.) It should still be visible when you go to bed at night, 10 to 12 hours later. If the iodine "disappears" earlier than that, you may need more iodine in your diet. You can get it by eating sea vegetables and seafood or by taking Iosol regularly—one to two drops a day or as directed by your health-care provider. Another great source is Modifilan (www.modifilan.com), a concentrated organic

seaweed extract. Recheck your iodine absorption every six weeks or so thereafter. *Note:* Replenishing iodine levels can lower the need for thyroid hormones, so be sure to monitor your thyroid hormone levels.

— *Benign uterine fibroids* (noncancerous tumors made up of muscle and connective tissue) develop in about 40 percent of women.

— *Changes in sex drive* are also common. Contrary to popular belief, the hormone changes during menopause don't lower sex drive in healthy women. For some women, however, a drop in testosterone from drugs, surgery, or adrenal exhaustion can reduce sexual desire. Changes in estrogen levels also reduce sex drive in some, in addition to causing vaginal dryness and irritation that make intercourse painful. (By the way, this can be easily alleviated with lubricants or topical estrogen creams available by prescription.) For women who've reached the one-year mark without a period, however, the freedom from the worry of unwanted pregnancy can actually be one factor in *heightening* sex drive.

Brain chemistry also changes in midlife, affecting the way we think and process information. For

example, midlife women often find that they not only have stronger feelings about injustice and unfairness, but they're also more willing to speak up about them. Because the temporal lobes in the brain are more often engaged, our intuition is enhanced. But unlike most of the symptoms in the previous list, the shifts in our brain chemistry are more or less permanent—a sign that we really do get wiser as life progresses.

You may also find that you have a much stronger creative drive now since your life energy isn't being used in order to have periods and create babies. Instead, it gets rerouted into powerful urges to create other things—anything from a personal journal of poetry and sketches to a thriving new business. Long-buried dreams and feelings resurface with a renewed passion at this time. It's as if your soul is saying, *Hey—what about me? When is it my turn?* If you don't act on your innermost dreams and desires now and instead hold them in—usually out of fear of disrupting or upsetting family members—then you're apt to have a much harder time with menopausal symptoms. But that's not all. You'll also be setting yourself up for health problems down the road.

The bottom line is that we women are designed to be more in touch with what really matters to us

after menopause, and our bodies act as incredibly accurate barometers that indicate how closely we live our lives in-line with our true heart's desires. When we get out of line with what we really want, we get a gentle nudge to warn us to make changes that will put us back on course. If we don't pay attention, the nudge may turn into a shove!

When you look at menopause from this perspective, you'll realize that your midlife body is Divinely designed to help you make choices that will keep you healthy and happy. Now what could be better than that?

Suffering Isn't Inevitable

How distressing your physical and emotional symptoms are during perimenopause depends on how out of balance with wellness your lifestyle has been in the years leading up to this point. Think of it this way: Your body has given you about 40 years or so to get your act together. During your teens, 20s, and 30s, your body is incredibly forgiving. If you're overstressed, overworked, or drink too much; if you smoke, underexercise, and eat a poor diet, you may still be able to maintain moderately good health.

But once you reach midlife, your body will no longer let you get away with this kind of lifestyle, and you'll eventually pay the price. So why not make changes for the better now! Women who approach menopause in a state of emotional and nutritional depletion typically have the most serious perimenopausal symptoms—not to mention poorer health as they age. On the other hand, studies show that women who have been eating right, exercising regularly, and taking good care of themselves don't tend to suffer from bone loss, low sex drive, cardiovascular problems, depression, forgetfulness, or other common menopausal challenges. Good news, right?

Your mind is also a key part in how easily you make this transition. Your attitudes, thoughts, beliefs, and expectations greatly impact how you experience menopause. Let me tell you about the women in the !Kung tribe in southern Africa. These women enjoy a higher social status after menopause, and as a result, instead of dreading the transition, they very much look forward to it. Their entire culture is in agreement with this belief. Not surprisingly, the !Kung don't have menopausal symptoms; in fact, they don't even have a word for "hot flash" in their language!

The Change—in How We Look at Midlife

The common belief in society has long been that menopause means you're getting old, and that's why your body is meant to start falling apart. But in reality, nothing could be further from the truth. You're just experiencing what I call "breakdown to breakthrough." The best is yet to come!

The menopausal transition is a wake-up call that's urging you to make changes that will keep you in touch with your vital life force (sometimes called *chi* or *prana*). The truth about this time of life is that when you have the courage to change your beliefs and behaviors so that you speak your truth and dare to cultivate pleasure instead of stress, you have the power to create a life of unbridled joy, unlimited abundance, and vibrant health. That absolutely includes having the best sex of your life . . . now that's something to look forward to!





· · · CHAPTER ONE · · ·

It's Not Over!

The end of our childbearing years may be the end of one season, but it certainly doesn't mean that it's all over and we're washed up—far from it! Even though this has been the conventional view for decades, the only thing that truly ends at menopause is a woman's ability to naturally conceive a child. (I use the word *naturally* because thanks to the latest scientific developments, postmenopausal women can—with a little help from technology—get pregnant and even give birth!) Instead of being an ending, menopause is really the beginning of our coming into our power in a whole new way. It's the springtime of the second half of life, and what many women are finding is that it's the *best* half of life!

Even though menopause isn't the end, it can certainly feel like it sometimes. The reason is simple—throughout much of human history, menopause *did* represent the end for many women. At the beginning of the 20th century, the average life expectancy for women was only 40 years.

The other reason why menopause can seem like the end is because this is a time when many of us feel the need to let go of whatever isn't working in our lives. This includes jobs, relationships, and lifestyles that don't support the fullness of who we're becoming. Letting go of our past requires faith and is rarely easy. But in the words of author Joseph Campbell, "We must be willing to get rid of the life we've planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us."

And there's a *lot* of life that is waiting for us after menopause. The average life expectancy for women today is well over 80! Not only are we living longer, but we're also living healthier than ever before. Cancer rates have gone down since 1991, and the number of women dying of heart disease has decreased five years in a row for the first time in written history. If a woman today reaches her 50th birthday without having had cancer or heart disease, she can expect to still be kicking at 92. The way this trend is going, someday women may live more years after menopause than they will before it!

We also no longer need to fear becoming mentally feeble in our later years. A study presented at the 2006 gathering of the Society for Neuroscience showed that with the right training, the brain of an 85-year-old can work just as adeptly as that of a 30-year-old. Good news!

The bottom line is that physical and mental decline is *not* a natural consequence of aging, as we've been led to believe. It's largely a consequence of our culture's *beliefs* about aging and of our lifestyle choices. However, those beliefs are changing rapidly as baby-boomer women reach midlife in record-breaking numbers. According to estimates by the U.S. Census Bureau, one in five adults in the U.S. today is a woman over 50.

Take a good look around and you'll see what I mean: Older women have never been emotionally stronger, economically more powerful, or physically more sexy and beautiful than they are right now!

Even better, fewer of us need convincing. Almost six out of ten women between the ages 50 and 70 like what they see when they look in the mirror, according to research reported by Marti Barletta in *PrimeTime Women*. Not only that, but a whopping 82 percent of women in this age group feel a lot younger than their actual age, and 59 percent believe

their greatest achievements are still ahead of them. Clearly, the image of the menopausal woman as a dried-up has-been no longer holds true.

I need look no further than my 82-year-old mother, Edna, for proof. In her late 60s, she hiked the entire Appalachian Trail. At 70, she spent three months hiking and kayaking in Alaska. Several years later, she climbed the 200 highest peaks in New England with her friend Anne, who is three years older than she is. And a few years ago, she climbed Mount Washington and went snowshoeing in northern Vermont with a 90-year-old friend. I'm beginning to wonder if she's even hit middle age yet!

Giving Birth Again

The physical and emotional discomfort many of us experience at perimenopause is in effect the labor pains of giving birth to our new, best selves. Instead of using our energy for everyone and everything else around us, as we did when we were raising our families and nurturing our careers, we're now biologically called to focus that energy on ourselves.

If you can't imagine putting yourself first, look at it this way: There's a reason why flight attendants

instruct those who are traveling with small children to put the oxygen mask on themselves *first* in the event that they drop from the overhead compartments. You can't help *anyone* if you don't take care of yourself first—if you don't, *everyone* loses.

For women who have reveled in the challenge, satisfaction, and even admiration of being the center of their families, giving up that position can be difficult indeed. It helps to realize that by updating our roles and giving up some of the reins of family control, we'll be setting a good example for our grown children. How fabulous to present our daughters (or daughters-in-law, grandchildren, or nieces) with a midlife role model whose life includes freedom, fulfillment, and fun as opposed to being stuck in duty and drudgery.

Would you want your children to hold back who they're fully capable of becoming? Of course not! Neither should you.

Rebirthing ourselves may involve rocking the boat a bit. It may call for disrupting the status quo, bucking convention, and saying no when we might otherwise have said yes (or vice versa). A big part of this transition is letting go of what we've outgrown that no longer serves us—the roles and relationships that hold us back and take more energy from us than they give us.

Here's an example from my own life: I bought a Mustang convertible to enjoy for myself, but on nice days, my daughter wanted to use it, too. So I let her. As a mother, I enjoy making her happy, but always giving in meant that I never had a chance to drive around with the top down myself! I realized that by doing this, I was engaging in what amounted to unhealthy self-sacrifice. So I soon started driving my convertible whenever I wanted to, and it felt great!

Whatever doesn't feed our soul and doesn't make us feel vibrantly alive needs to fall by the wayside now. Our lives have no room for such things anymore. Everything we think, say, and do from this point on will either keep us actively engaged in living passionately and joyfully, or it will hasten degeneration and increase our chances of poor health and disease. It's our choice to make.

Know also that this emotional housecleaning isn't a onetime event. It becomes a new way of life. As soon as you recognize that something isn't working for you anymore, you always have the opportunity to make a new choice that fits your needs better.

The Cleansing Fire of Anger

Stormy emotions typically accompany the midlife transition. One of the emotions that often fuels this personal rebirth is anger. Anger is a sign that you've been putting up with things that haven't served you fully—and you're not willing to put up with them anymore. The anger of midlife women is the brunt of many jokes. But believe me, this anger is like jet fuel—it's the energy needed to propel you into your new life.

One of the reasons why anger surfaces is because we feel an almost fierce need to have our say and to be heard—sometimes for the first time in decades. Many of us stifled our true voice sometime in adolescence, when we were more concerned with fitting in, finding our place, and following the rules. Now that we're redefining who we are, we can no longer put a lid on what upsets us, and with good reason. Although we may be used to thinking of anger as a negative, in the midlife transition it can be seen as a measure of the strength of our vital life force. In fact, if the symptoms of perimenopause are the labor pains we experience as we give birth to our authentic selves at midlife, then our anger is the cry of our newborn selves whom we've just birthed.

The Power of Midlife Passion

Passion is another emotion we often unleash with renewed intensity at this time of life. Many midlife women feel a growing enthusiasm for activities they previously put on the back burner and report that their lives change for the better when they start engaging in pursuits that excite them. Such activities can include things like reading books, going to the movies with friends, traveling, horseback riding, creating artwork, being out in nature, writing poetry, and even redecorating (in other words, anything enjoyable that they never took the time to do). This can also include volunteering for a cause that's greater than themselves. There's something life-giving and life-enhancing about lending our efforts toward the greater good. And believe it or not, the good feelings that come from giving back can also spill over into our sex lives!

Indulging in our passions is an important part of our midlife passage because it helps us connect at a deep emotional and spiritual level with our newly emerging selves. These activities aren't a luxury. Doing what we love and what brings us pleasure keeps our life force well stoked. This is definitely a time to, as the saying goes, follow our bliss.

There's something vitally important that you should know about what happens when you do this: Women who make a point of maintaining a strong, passionate life force become magnetically attractive to uplifting people and circumstances. (Statistics show that they also add about eight years to their lives!) So while you're having a great time with all of the wonderful things you're bringing into your life, you'll also be sending out signals that say to the universe, *I'm loving life and loving that I love life, so bring on more of the good stuff!* The universe always responds, because whatever you give your attention to grows. And when you give your attention to bringing life-affirming, fun things into your life, you open up a channel for more of the same to come in. It's as simple as that.

In fact, this feeling of being in love with life itself is absolutely vital if you want to have a passionate, fulfilling relationship with a partner. After all, you can't give what you don't have. Ratcheting up the passion, excitement, and enthusiasm in all areas of your life will also help you increase the passion in your current relationship or help you attract a mate with whom you can have a red-hot relationship. In other words, before you can have a passionate relationship with someone else, you have to already be in a passionate relationship—with yourself and your life.

Here's why passion is a vital key in your life. When you allow joy and pleasure into your life, you're more in touch with your truest self, and that's the self who will be attracting others to you. That authentic self is powerful, beautiful, and positively intoxicating to others who likewise have the same level of passion in their lives. (And believe it or not, your true essence is much more attractive than the person you think you should be or the person you want everyone to think you are!) So the way it works is that as these other people who are in love with life are sending out their upbeat signals, you'll be able to pick up on them as surely and easily as they're picking up on yours. Like attracts like. It's one of the laws of the universe!

I want to stress that there is no age limit for having a passionate relationship of any kind—including having a passionate sex life. Although society often leads us to believe that menopause means the death of sexual desire, that kind of thinking is definitely outmoded. As long as we maintain vibrant physical and emotional health, we can maintain a vibrantly healthy sex life. Going through menopause doesn't decrease sexual desire in women who are healthy and happy. In fact, the number one predictor of a strong libido at menopause is having a new sexual

partner—even for women who previously had less-than-wonderful sex lives.

This doesn't mean you should dump your partner. It means that you yourself can *become* a new partner. As long as your head and heart are willing, your body will find a way.

Another important key to a healthy sex life, no matter how old you are, is that any woman can learn to turn her body on. It's true! But doing so isn't something you can address only in bed. Sexual desire starts with an idea and is fueled by your thoughts and attitudes as much as it is by any physical action or response. You don't need to have the body of a young woman to be sexy and desirable. You simply have to start thinking of yourself as a sexually desirable woman! As human sexuality researcher Gina Ogden, Ph.D., puts it, "Self-esteem is the mother of sexual desire, and that desire can ripen with age—like fine wine."

When you have the courage to go through the cleansing fires of perimenopause, you emerge from the other side into the life that is, indeed, waiting for you.

And you find that it's better than you ever dreamed it could be!



About the Author

Christiane Northrup, M.D., is a visionary pioneer and beloved authority in the field of women's health and wellness. A board-certified ob-gyn who graduated from Dartmouth Medical School and did her residency at Tufts–New England Medical Center, Dr. Northrup was also an assistant clinical professor of obstetrics-gynecology at Maine Medical Center for more than 20 years. Recognizing the unity of body, mind, and spirit, she helps empower women to tune in to their innate inner wisdom in order to transform their health and truly flourish.

Dr. Northrup is the author of two *New York Times* best-selling books, *Women's Bodies*, *Women's*

Wisdom (Bantam, revised 2006) and *The Wisdom of Menopause* (Bantam, revised 2006). Her third book, *Mother-Daughter Wisdom* (Bantam, 2005), was a 2005 Quill Award nominee and was voted **Amazon.com's** number one book of the year in both Parenting and Mind/Body Health.

Dr. Northrup has also hosted six highly successful PBS specials. Her latest, *Menopause and Beyond: New Wisdom for Women*, began airing nationwide in March 2007. Her work has been featured on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, the *Today* show, *NBC Nightly News with Tom Brokaw*, *The View*, *Rachael Ray*, and *Good Morning America*. For more information about Dr. Northrup and her work, please visit her Website at: **www.drnorthrup.com**.





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