

Women's Health Guide



National Women's Health Week

National Women's Health Week begins, appropriately, on Mother's Day. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the purpose of the week is to be a fun and informative reminder for women, who frequently bear the majority of caring for family, to make their own health a priority as well.

The CDC has a lot of great ways to participate, and they encourage women to share their healthy activities on social media with the hashtag #NWHW.

AT WORK

Most of us spend a large percentage of our waking hours at work, and that often means sitting at a desk. But there are ways to make your workday healthier. You can take a walk during your lunch break (invite your coworkers!), have standing meetings or stand at your desk, plan a healthy potluck, challenge coworkers to a health competition, like drinking the most water or taking the most steps, or have someone teach a yoga class at the office. If you have a bike or live close enough to walk to work, eschew the car for the commute once or twice.

Employers who want to have a healthier workplace can plan a health fair, hold free health screenings, organize an office-wide fitness activity like a class or a walk with the CEO or host a salad bar for lunch. Make these fun with door prizes, incentives, recipes and other take-home items that employees can make use of.

AT HOME

Make a special effort to



cook this week instead of eating prepackaged foods or going out to eat. If you're tired after a full day of work, consider encouraging children to try their hand at easy recipes or do much of the prepara-

tion, like chopping vegetables, over the weekend. Drink water instead of soda or juice. You can also feel good about doing housework or yard work, all of which can burn calories.

AT PLAY

Go to a fitness class at your local gym, go hiking or get outside and take a walk with your next-door neighbor, your dog or your family. Or, push the couch aside, crank up

some music and have a dance party in your living room. Wiped out from your week and just want to veg in front of the TV? You can stretch, do yoga or lift some light weights while you watch.

Preventing Heart Disease

Hear disease is the No. 1 killer of American women — a fact made even more dangerous by almost half of women not knowing it is such a threat, according to the CDC. Only 54 percent of women know heart disease is responsible for 25 percent of deaths in the United States.

Since 64 percent of women who die of coronary heart disease had no previous symptoms, not knowing how great the risk is could quite literally be fatal.

SYMPTOMS

Unfortunately, heart disease presents differently from patient to patient, but there are signs for which to watch. Angina — a dull pain or discomfort in the chest — is common, as is pain in the neck, jaw, throat, upper abdomen or back, according to the CDC. Women with heart disease are more likely to report chest pain that is sharp or burning.

Other symptoms include shortness of breath, fatigue and swelling (heart failure); chest and upper back pain, indigestion, heartburn, nausea, exhaustion (heart attack); heart palpitations (arrhythmia); or a weakness, paralysis, numbness and difficulty functioning (stroke). These events often are the first indication women have that they have heart disease.

RISK FACTORS FOR HEART DISEASE

High blood pressure and LDL cholesterol (the “bad” cholesterol, as opposed to HDL) and smoking are the most significant risk factors for heart disease. Others that can contribute to heart disease include diabetes, being overweight or obese, a diet that’s not balanced, not enough exercise or drinking too much alcohol.

If you think you’re at risk, talk to your doctor about those factors that affect you.



GETTING SCREENED

According to the CDC, about half of Americans have at least one of the three biggest risk factors, and many of us have other indicators as well. There are many steps you can take to find out your level of risk and protect yourself.

- Know your blood pressure. If it’s

too high, talk to your doctor about lifestyle changes you can make and potential medications to lower your blood pressure.

- Get your cholesterol and triglycerides tested and consider being tested for diabetes.
- Quit smoking.
- Reduce your alcohol intake. The

CDC recommends one drink a day.

- Eat more fruits, vegetables and fiber, while limiting processed foods.
- Exercise.
- Make sure you have healthy ways to deal with stress. That can include exercise, meditation or creating art. Getting enough sleep can contribute to this as well.

Prenatal Health

Thinking about having a baby? There are many healthy choices women can make to increase their chances of having a healthy baby and keep themselves healthy during pregnancy.

Even if you're not ready for a baby or are beyond child-bearing years, many of these tips from the CDC can help all women become stronger and healthier.

FOLIC ACID

Take 400 micrograms of folic acid, a B vitamin, daily for at least one month before pregnancy as well as throughout pregnancy. Studies show having enough folic acid can help prevent birth defects in the baby's spine and brain, such as anencephaly and spina bifida. Taking folic acid is a good idea for all women, regardless of her pregnancy plans, because the vitamin contributes to making new cells, which, among other things, helps skin, hair and nails grow quickly.

Women can take a vitamin that has folic acid in it – most multivitamins will have the required dose – take a folic acid pill daily or find a favorite cereal that has 400 micrograms of folic acid. Look for labels with 100 percent next to folic acid.

LIFESTYLE CHANGES

The CDC recommends women who want to get pregnant stop smoking and

drinking alcohol. Using these products during pregnancy can cause many problems for the baby, including premature birth and birth defects. Stopping prior to conception will reduce stress on a woman's body while she is pregnant as well.

Also pay attention to toxins in your environment like fertilizer, bug spray, rodent species and synthetic chemicals. These contaminants can cause damage to women's and men's reproductive systems, making pregnancy more difficult or causing birth defects in the baby.

HEALTHY WEIGHT

Women who are overweight or obese are more likely to experience complications during pregnancy, but losing weight during pregnancy is difficult and may not be healthy, so work toward a healthy weight before conception. Being underweight also can contribute to health problems. If you're not sure, talk to your doctor about how to get to a healthy weight and healthy eating habits that will aid you during pregnancy.

PRE-EXISTING CONDITIONS

Talk to your doctor about medications you're taking and their potential effects on a baby to determine if you need to stop taking any. This includes vitamins and supplements. Get up to date on vaccinations, which can protect both you and your baby. Also take a survey of your mental health and make sure your mind is as prepared for a baby as your body.



Reproductive Health

Whether women plan to get pregnant or not, they need to ensure they are tending to their reproductive health to avoid yeast infections, cervical cancer and other illnesses, according to the CDC. There is plenty women can do, both working with their health care providers and on their own, to ensure they stay healthy.

HEALTHY MENSTRUATION

A regular period is a sign that a woman's reproductive system is healthy. Typically, menstrual cycles last 28 days and menstruation lasts three to four days, but each woman is different; a cycle can last from 24 to 38 days and still be normal.

Keeping track of your menstrual cycle is a good thing. That helps you to know if your cycle is regular, when you are most likely to get pregnant and when your next period will start, which is particularly helpful if you more severe cramps or bleeding and need to miss school or work.

Irregular or heavy, painful periods are not typical. You should not regularly miss activities because of period symptoms. See your health care provider to discuss treatment options.

PMS

Premenstrual syndrome presents itself after ovulation and before menstruation and is a combination of physical and emotional symptoms

Communities and families where women are healthy and have access to health care see better health overall — healthier parents in the home, fewer unintended pregnancies, healthier babies.

caused by changing hormone levels. Symptoms differ among women, but include intestinal discomfort, tender breast, cramps, headache or backache, clumsiness, irritability, exhaustion, changes in eating and sleeping habits, anxiety and depression.

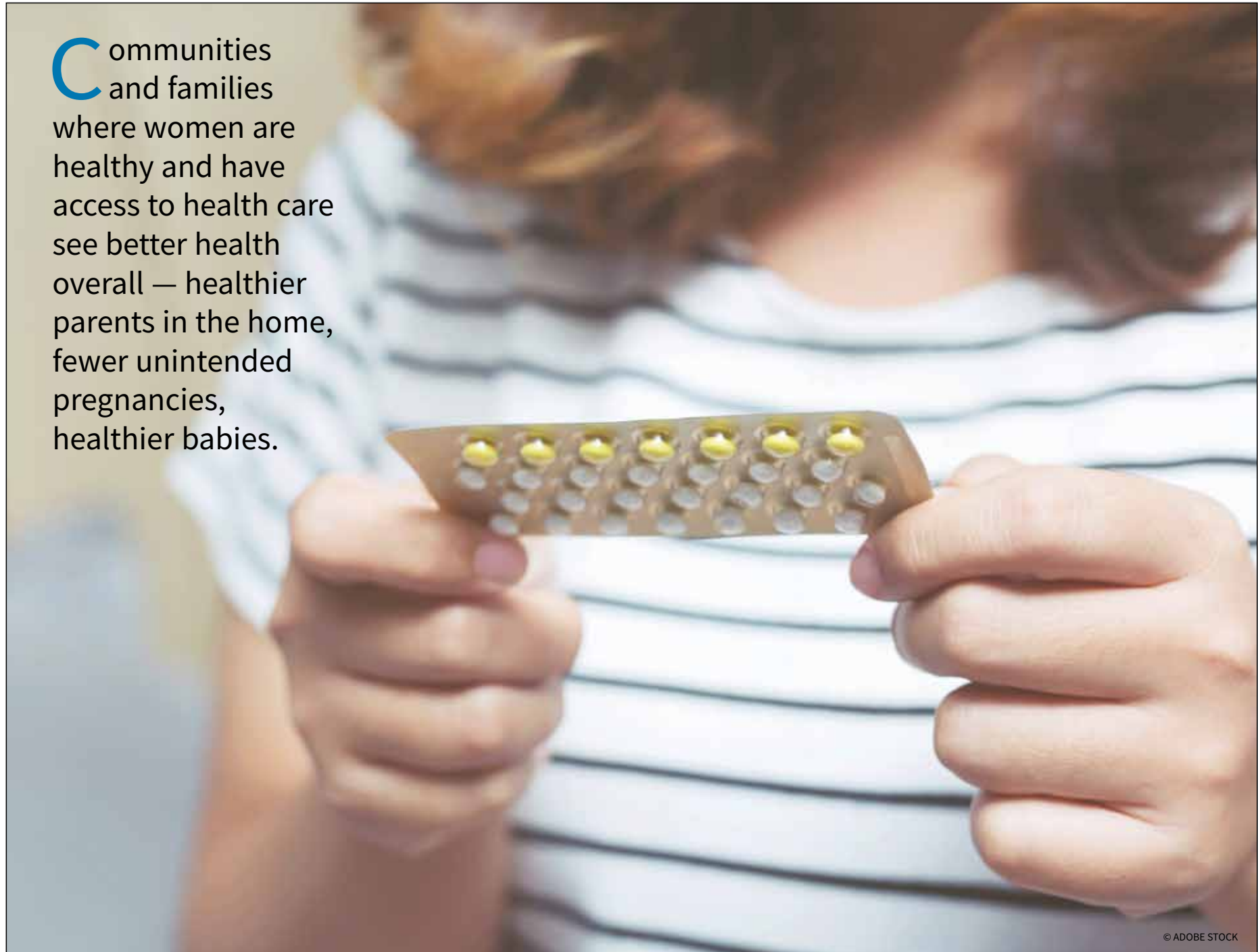
BIRTH CONTROL

Using birth control can greatly reduce the chance of an unplanned pregnancy. (About half of all pregnancies in the U.S. are unplanned, according to the CDC.) The most effective are intrauterine devices or implants, which involve a med-

ical procedure but should last for years. Pills, shots, patches, rings and diaphragms, which have a fail rate between 6 and 12 percent when used correctly, require the user to take the necessary steps at the right time. Condoms, sponges and spermicide must be used cor-

rectly every time to be effective and still have higher failure rates than other types of birth control.

Even when using other types of birth control, using condoms can help protect users from the transmission of sexually transmitted infections.



Infertility

Infertility is defined as not getting pregnant after a year of trying, or six months if the woman is 35 or older, according to Womenshealth.gov. About 10 percent of U.S. women experience infertility, of which most cases are caused by problems with ovulation. There are reproductive conditions women experience that can contribute to infertility.

ENDOMETRIOSIS

Endometriosis occurs when the uterine lining grows outside the uterus. According to Womenshealth.gov, it affects more than one in 10 pre-menopausal women and is especially common among women in their 30s and 40s. Studies show it makes conception more difficult and often presents as unusually painful menstrual cramps, chronic lower back pain, bleeding between menstrual periods and digestive problems. Hormonal birth control can help control the symptoms; women trying to get pregnant can take a medication that temporarily causes menopause but helps to slow the growth of endometriosis.

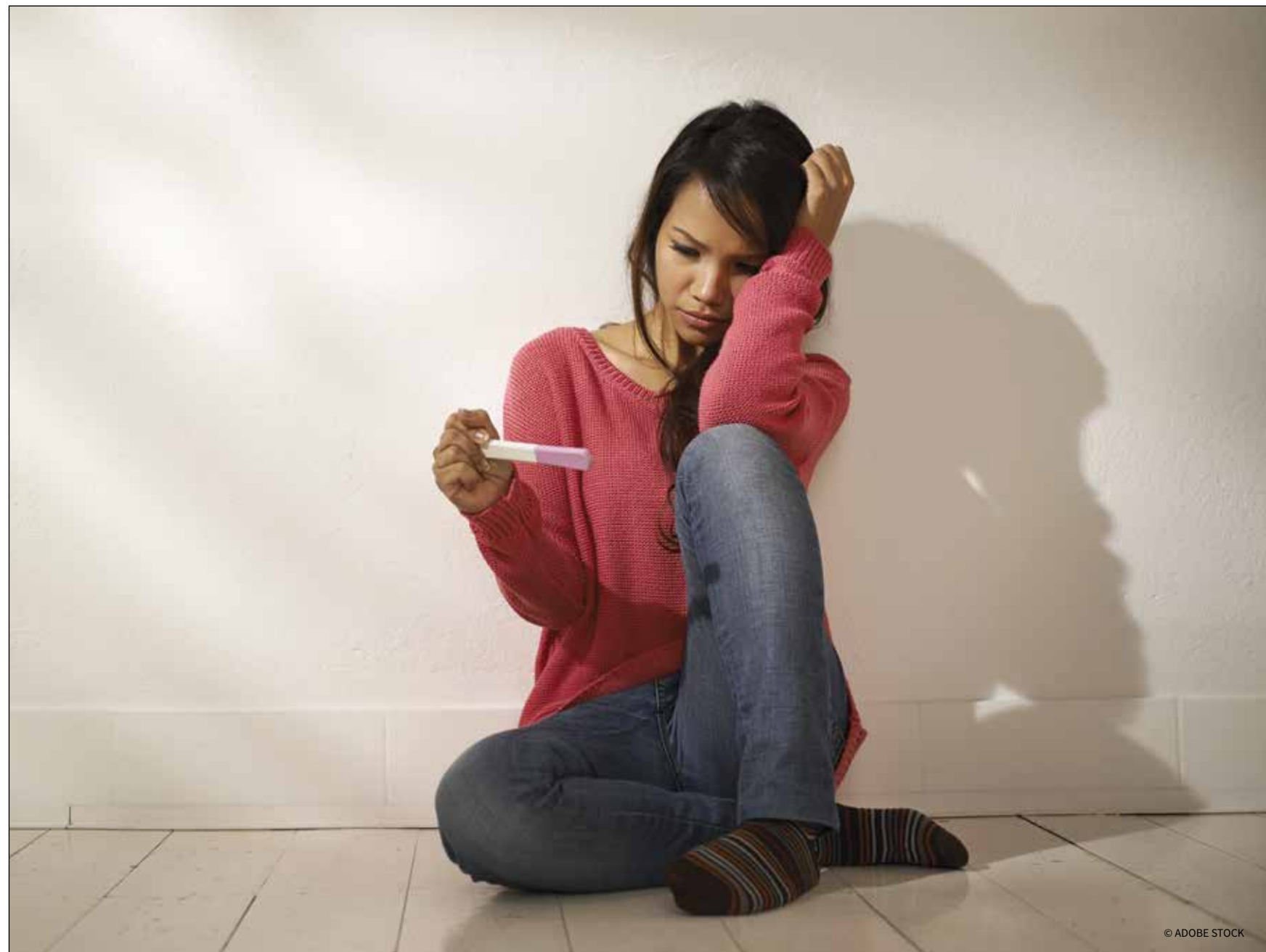
PCOS

Polycystic ovarian syndrome is a hormonal imbalance that can cause missed or irregular periods and the development of cysts in the ovaries. It is one of the most common causes of infertility in the United States. Symptoms include an irregular menstrual cycle, acne, thinning hair, weight gain and hair on the face.

There isn't a cure for PCOS, and treatment depends on symptoms, your plans for children and other risk factors, such as your risk of conditions like diabetes or heart disease.

Weight loss can help lower blood glucose levels and help your body reach its normal hormone levels, so healthy eating habits and regular physical activity can help control PCOS symptoms.

Medications to treat PCOS includes hormonal birth control to make periods more regular and help improve



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acne or anti-androgen medicines.

PRIMARY OVARIAN INSUFFICIENCY

According to the Mayo Clinic, premature ovarian failure or insufficiency is when the ovaries stop working

before a woman turns 40 years old.

The ovaries don't produce normal amounts of estrogen or release eggs regularly. Symptoms include irregular periods, hot flashes, night sweats and decreased sexual desire — symptoms that are typical of menopause as well.

OTHER CAUSES

Fallopian tubes blocked by pelvic inflammatory disease or surgery for an ectopic pregnancy can cause infertility, as can physical problems with the uterus or uterine fibroids — benign clumps of tissue and muscle on uterine walls.

Mental Health Issues

Mental illness remains a serious health threat in our country. Depression is among the most common among all groups; about 10 percent of women experience depression or depressive symptoms, according to the CDC.

Depression goes beyond feeling sad; it typically represents as a prolonged sadness that can interfere with daily life and relationships and even cause physical pain in those who suffer from it. It is not an illness that should be ignored or that women should try to power through on their own.

Depression is treatable, often with a combination of medication and therapy. If you think you or a loved one may be depressed, contact your health care provider to talk about your symptoms and ask for a referral to a therapist.

Even women who don't have depression should pay attention to their mental health, which is as important to their overall health as is physical health. Mental health, which includes emotional, psychological and social well-being, affects how we relate to others and ourselves, how we act, how we handle stress and even how we feel about things that happen to us.

SYMPTOMS

According to the CDC, depression doesn't manifest itself exactly the same in every person. However, there are a number of symptoms that can point to depression, including:

- Prolonged sad or anxious mood.
- Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism, guilt, worthlessness, irritability or restlessness.
- Loss of energy, interest in hobbies.
- Problems concentrating, recalling details, making decisions.
- Difficulty falling asleep or sleeping too much.
- Eating too much or not enough.
- Thoughts of suicide or suicide attempts.



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- Physical aches and pains that don't respond to treatment.

POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION

About one in nine women experience depression after giving birth; these feelings tend to be more intense and last longer than feelings of baby blues, which describes worry, sadness and exhaustion common after birth.

The baby blues usually resolve in a few days. Postpartum depression lasts longer and often requires treatment.

SYMPTOMS OF PPD INCLUDE:

- Crying more than usual.
- Feeling angry, numb or disconnected from your baby, or guilt about not being a good mother.
- Withdrawing from loved ones.

- Worrying you will hurt the baby.

Postpartum depression can manifest itself days, weeks or even months after giving birth. Women who are experiencing these symptoms should contact their doctors and ask about postpartum depression. Women who are pregnant or breastfeeding may still be able to take the necessary medications for treating depression.

Menopause

As a woman ages, she eventually hits menopause, when her ovaries stop producing estrogen and progesterone. This happens at different times for different women, though according to Medline Plus, most women don't experience menopause until at least their late 40s.

She has hit menopause when she hasn't menstruated for a year, though evidence of menopause starts months or even years earlier.

The symptoms of menopause include:

- Periods that are different durations, lighter or heavier, or more or less frequent than normal.
- Hot flashes and night sweats.
- Difficulty sleeping and focusing.
- Mood swings.
- Vaginal dryness.
- Less hair on head, more on face.

Some of these symptoms, such as hot flashes, may require treatment. Talk to your doctor about what you're experiencing and if there are ways to lessen discomfort.

Women can take many steps to keep themselves healthy and manage the symptoms of menopause, according to the Mayo Clinic, one of the best ways to make the change a good one is regular exercise.

Exercise helps to prevent weight gain, reduces women's risk of cancer and other diseases, strengthens bones (osteoporosis becomes a greater risk after menopause) and helps women feel better mentally.

The Department of Health and Human Services recommends 150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity weekly, as



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well as strength training at least twice a week. Aerobic exercises can include brisk walking or running, biking, swimming or team sports, for women who enjoy that. Strength training can be done with free weights in your living room or machines at the gym. Using a

resistance band is a good place to start for beginners.

Women going through menopause should pay special attention to their diet as well. According to Womenshealth.gov, women still need all the nutrients they always have, but older women generally need

fewer calories. The specifics of that depend on your age, height, weight and activity level, so talk to your health care provider about what a healthy daily intake for you is.

Menopausal women also need more calcium; doctors recommend women older than

50 years get 1,200 milligrams of calcium each day, which may need to come from a supplement. They also need more of vitamins D, B12 and B6. You can get these from your diet, but you may need to take a supplement to ensure you're getting enough.