

# Autism and menopause



We are the UK's leading charity for autistic people and their families and our mission is to create a society that works for autistic people

## What is the menopause?

The **NHS** describes the menopause as 'when your periods stop due to lower hormone levels'. It usually happens between the ages of **45** and **55**, but it can happen earlier.

- It affects anyone who has periods.
- It can bring challenges whether or not you are autistic.
- Menopause is reached **12 months** after your periods (**menstruation**) have ended.
- Perimenopause occurs when there are symptoms of menopause before periods have stopped.
- Both menopause and perimenopause can cause various symptoms, including:
  - anxiety
  - mood swings
  - confusion or issues with memory, known as 'brain fog'
  - hot flushes (sometimes called 'hot flashes'), which the NHS describes as "sudden feelings of hot or cold in your face, neck and chest which can make you dizzy"
  - irregular periods (during perimenopause).

## Current research

- This guide uses examples from current research about how the menopause can impact autistic people, and how having a better understanding of yourself and the menopause can be helpful.
- However, research on autistic people's experiences of menopause, its impact and strategies for support is unfortunately very limited.
- We have conducted a thorough review of the best available and most up-to-date evidence from research, professional practice and lived experience, which is the source for our **Menopause advice and guidance** pages.

## Understanding yourself

- Some autistic people report that menopause played a role in discovering that they are autistic, as their autistic traits became more apparent during menopause or perimenopause.
- One study suggests that autistic people benefit from knowing they are autistic before they reach menopause, as this helps to:
  - understand why their menopause experience might be different to non-autistic people
  - advocate more effectively and have more compassion for themselves
  - come up with coping strategies that work for them.

## How the menopause can impact autistic people

- Menopause can affect autistic people in a number of ways and their autistic characteristics may become more apparent, including:
  - intensified sensory sensitivities
  - difficulty with emotional regulation
  - difficulty with executive function, for example planning, focusing and multitasking
  - increased difficulty with social interaction and communication
  - difficulty with the lack of predictability around your bodily or sensory experience
  - difficulty identifying internal states, such as hunger and temperature (this is known as 'atypical interoception')
  - difficulty recognising and communicating emotions (known as 'alexithymia')
  - difficulty seeking support due to alexithymia, atypical interoception and communication difficulties.
- Some autistic people with ADHD found that their ADHD traits became more prominent.

## What can make menopause easier?

These tips are taken from an article on menopause which featured in our membership magazine *Your Autism* as well as treatment advice from our website [information on the menopause](#).

### Be prepared

- Knowing what to expect may take away some of the fear and confusion of not knowing what's happening to you.
- Before menopause, it may be helpful to think about what's 'normal' to you in terms of your body, so that you're more aware and able to tell healthcare professionals when something changes.

### Be kind to yourself

- Research suggests that autistic people might have it harder than non-autistic people, so be kind to yourself if you're finding things more difficult.

### Know that menopause is different for everyone

- Some autistic people will have a very easy menopause.
- The symptoms you're experiencing don't have to be forever; and there are treatment options available.
- If you think you're experiencing perimenopause, book an appointment to see your doctor or nurse.
- Take a list of your symptoms and a supporter with you to your appointment if that helps.

### Gather your support network

- If you can, talk to your support network (in advance if possible) so that people understand and are prepared to help.
- You can also direct them to sources of information around autistic menopause, like our charity's [Menopause advice and guidance](#) pages or research by Dr Rachel Mosley [www.scienceonthespectrum.net](http://www.scienceonthespectrum.net).

## Connect with other autistic people

- It can help to share tips and advice, especially if you can connect with autistic people of a similar age.
- There are some great social media groups geared towards older autistic women or older autistic people (eg on Facebook), so look to see if you can join a friendly online community. Join our [online community](#) page, to meet like-minded people and share your experiences.
- If you're autistic and going through or have gone through menopause, you might be interested in a current study called Bridging the Silos. Read about it: [www.autisticmenopause.com](http://www.autisticmenopause.com).

## Treatment

Treatment for menopause and perimenopause symptoms is the same for autistic and non-autistic people.

- The main medicine treatment is hormone replacement therapy (HRT), which replaces hormones that are at low levels during the menopause. Not everyone can take HRT (for example, people with breast cancer cannot) and some people choose not to.
- There are also non-hormone treatments for certain symptoms, such as hot flushes and low mood. Visit the NHS page [Treatment for menopause symptoms](#) for more information and speak to your GP about what is best for you.

"I didn't realise what was happening when the menopause hit me. I was tired, aching all the time, and extra stressed. I realised I also had memory and attention problems when I started missing meetings at work and forgetting what people had told me. I also had uncontrollable emotions and, though I've always been anxious, for the first time I experienced panic attacks.

"But the new and very weird thing was hot flushes. It felt like a sudden furnace inside my middle; the waves of heat so powerful, I'd gasp. I'd be madly waving a document or fighting with my clothes, and someone would ask if I was OK. I'd reply "Don't worry, it's just a hot flush", with no idea this could be awkward.

"It's perfectly natural in half the population, so when I realised others were uncomfortable about it, I was confused. But when I spoke to my GP about HRT, he was excellent. I'd had previous problems with hormones, so he offered low-dose patches. They calmed the mood swings and stopped the hot flushes. I will continue to use them as long as I can."



## Carol's story

- Carol was diagnosed as autistic in her late 50s.
- This is her experience of menopause.