

My 45th birthday is coming; what should I expect?

By Sandra Rivard, MD

When I was asked to write this article, I thought, “Sure, easy enough. I just need to write about the signs, symptoms and treatment options of menopause.”

We all know the symptoms associated with menopause: the dreaded hot flashes, the wonderful mood swings (wasn't PMS supposed to disappear after the cycles stop?), the unexpected free time during the wee hours of the

morning and the struggle to remember even the simplest tasks. There is also the slower metabolism (how slow can it get?) and the weekly argument with the scale.

We are also very aware of the health risks associated with life after menopause: increased risk for heart disease, osteoporosis and breast and ovarian cancer.

Then I sat in front of a blank page for hours. Is that really what I want to look forward to on my 45th birthday (which, by the way, is still a few years away...)? Absolutely not! If my life expectancy is approximately 81 years and the average age of menopause is 51.4 years, I plan to fully enjoy this last third of my life.

True, I will face a new physical life with some disturbing symptoms, but I plan to stay well-informed about my health choices and share this knowledge with all who ask. I am grateful to the Women's Health Initiative Study, which reminded physicians like me to continue asking pertinent questions and to always provide care based on proven scientific data.

Now we have many more choices to help with menopausal symptoms. Hormone replacement therapy can be customized to meet specific needs. Whether a woman prefers a pill, a patch, a lotion, a gel or even a vaginal ring, she now knows that she can use a very low dose of estrogen to address her symptoms and that she does not increase her risk for breast cancer if she uses her hormone replacement therapy for less than five years.

I am also grateful that research has clarified many risk factors for cardiovascular disease in women. Heart disease does not have to be a silent killer anymore. Physicians are more proactive in early detection and prevention. That's why I intend to make healthy choices for myself and to

encourage women to do the same — and have fun doing so. Let's eat healthy with low fat, no trans fat and lots of omegas and antioxidants. Let's not forget our calcium supplement with enough vitamin D. And let's *exercise*. Walking clubs are a wonderful way to stay connected with friends.

But let's not forget to nurture the soul as well. Menopause is medically defined as the *end* of the reproductive period with the cessation of the menstrual cycle. I want to be reminded that it is also the beginning of a new stage in life. A stage where we are more self-assured and where we can embrace who we are. A stage where we can fully appreciate the results of our hard work, whether it is raising a family, building a fulfilling career or developing meaningful relationships. A stage where we hopefully welcome wisdom and serenity.

So what do I expect on my 45th birthday? I expect to look forward to this next stage of my life. I expect to make choices that will ease this transition. I expect to celebrate life.



Sandra Rivard, MD, talks more about Red Hot Mamas: What to Expect as You Approach Menopause on Jan. 19 at **The Women's Hospital of Greensboro.** Register online at www.mosescone.com or call **832-8000.**

