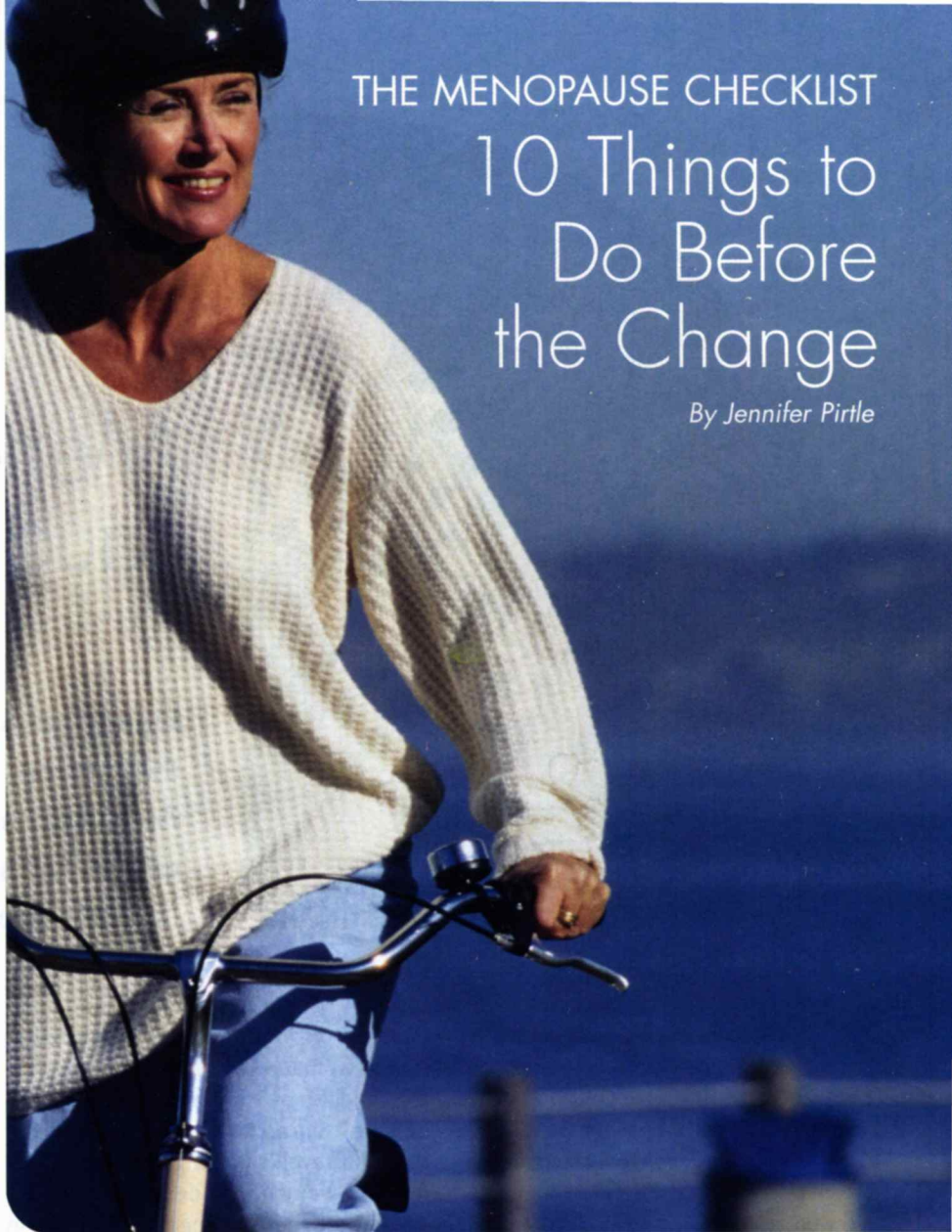


THE MENOPAUSE CHECKLIST

10 Things to Do Before the Change

By Jennifer Pirtle

No matter where you are in the menopause transition, it's never too late to get your health act together to ensure the next 40 or so years are as terrific as or better than the first were. To that end, we've compiled the CHANGES Menopause Checklist.



1 CHOOSE THE RIGHT HEALTH-CARE PROVIDER

"In the childbearing years, when the risk of most major medical conditions is low, women are more likely to have annual visits with a gynecologist and may not be as likely to seek care from an internist or family practitioner," says Maureen Connelly, M.D., co-director of the Harvard Vanguard Menopause Consultation in Boston. "Perimenopause is the perfect time to find a health-care provider you can trust to help you manage any serious medical problems, should they arise in the future. Ask your friends for recommendations or check out the NAMS list of credentialed Menopause Practitioners (www.menopause.org/consumers) to see if one is in your area. Always interview your potential choice before committing to be a patient," she says.

2 BOOK A PHYSICAL EXAM

Have your blood pressure and cholesterol levels checked and ask for a thyroid test, says Connelly. About one-quarter of perimenopausal women develop hypothyroidism, in which thyroid hormone levels drop too low. Symptoms include irregular periods, mood disturbances, low energy levels and sleep disturbances — quite similar to those of perimenopause. And if you haven't had a mammogram, schedule one today. Then, check with your clinician about how frequently you should have one in the future.

3 WATCH YOUR DIET

Limiting saturated fats may help curb the gain of five or more pounds that most women experience in midlife, says Veronica Ravnika, M.D., clinical professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City. It can also help reduce the menopause-related rise in LDL-cholesterol, the "bad" cholesterol known to increase your risk of cardiovascular disease in later years. Be sure your diet includes lots of fatty fish like salmon, which is rich in heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids (alternative sources of these healthy fats include flax seeds, flax oil and walnuts).

4**LEARN YOUR RISK OF OSTEOPOROSIS**

Your family history, ethnic background, smoking, being underweight, and any history of digestive illnesses can increase your chances of developing the brittle-bone disease. Early menopause also increases your risk. Boost your intake of calcium-containing foods, such as dairy products, nuts, leafy greens, blackstrap molasses and fish with edible bones to ensure you're getting enough dietary calcium.

5**MIND YOUR MOOD**

If you were prone to hormonal mood swings during your reproductive years, you may experience them again with the fluctuating levels of estrogen during perimenopause. Pay close attention to your moods, especially if you have experienced depression in the past, including the postpartum variety. "Menopause is not associated with depression, but you may be prone to a recurrence of depression during perimenopause if you've had it in the past," says Ravnika.

6**GET MOVING**

Not only will you feel better if you exercise, but a regular physical activity routine has been shown to help alleviate depression, curb weight gain, lower heart disease risk, maintain bone health and provide a whole host of other benefits. "Any movement is better than nothing, even if it's just getting off the couch and taking your dog for a walk," says Connelly. Clip a pedometer onto your waistband and aim for 10,000 brisk steps a day. "You might not get there, but you'll at least get a realistic assessment of your level of physical activity," she says.

7**LIMIT YOUR ALCOHOL INTAKE**

There's some thought that alcohol may affect the liver's ability to process estrogen efficiently, says Connelly, which may be one reason the Harvard Nurses' Health Study found the risk of breast cancer in women who had one or more drinks per day was 60 percent higher than in women who abstained.

8**STOP SMOKING**

And if you don't smoke, don't start. "Smoking reduces estrogen levels and brings on menopause an average of 1.5 years earlier," says Connelly. In other words, if you smoke, you're going to hit menopause earlier than if you don't. Nicotine has also been shown to increase the frequency and duration of hot flashes. Smoking increases the risk for osteoporosis — plus lung cancer, cervical cancer, heart disease and diabetes.

9**CONTINUE BIRTH CONTROL**

While irregular periods signal the impending end of your reproductive life, menopause (and inability to conceive) is not reached until you've been without periods for 12 consecutive months. So unless you're trying to become pregnant, don't throw out your birth control just yet. Hormonal contraceptive use will cause periods to continue, even after menopause, so talk to your health-care provider about when to stop taking "the pill."

10**MANAGE YOUR STRESS**

Midlife can be stressful, particularly because new stressors often appear at this time, such as caring for aging parents and children leaving home. Stress has multiple adverse effects on the body, including an increased risk for heart disease, diabetes and cancer. Stress also can cause a heightened state of alertness that can keep you from getting a good night's sleep, something that's difficult enough during this transitional period.



Physical exercise is not just a great way to keep fit, it also offers tremendous advantages when it comes to the alleviation of menopausal symptoms.