



Health Inequalities: Menopause

Introduction

Menopause, when a woman stops having periods, is a gradual process during which women experience perimenopause before reaching postmenopause. The average age of menopause in the UK is 51¹. Menopausal symptoms are extremely common. Hot flushes and night sweats are the most common symptoms reported by women living in the UK. In addition, many women report other symptoms which can include: sleep disturbance; depression and mood changes; musculoskeletal pain; and urogenital symptoms².

Prevalence and risk factors

What little evidence there is suggests that women with learning disabilities, and in particular women with Down syndrome, tend to have earlier menopause than other women^{3 4}. Early age at menopause has been found to be associated with an increased risk of dementia (Hazard Ratio (HR) 1.82 (95% CI 1.31, 2.52) and with risk of death (HR 2.05 (95% CI 1.33, 3.16)⁵.

Impact on people with learning disabilities

A recent UK study found that women with learning disabilities had similar experiences of menopausal symptoms to other women but that they had poorer understanding of menopause and menstruation⁶. Level of knowledge about the menopause has been found to be generally low in women with learning disabilities⁷. Carers report being poorly trained and resourced to help women understand the menopause⁸. Carers may miss symptoms of the menopause and have difficulty in disentangling physical and psychological problems stemming from menopausal changes from changes in behaviours due to other causes⁸. Epilepsy is common in people with learning disabilities⁹ and women with catamenial epilepsy (where seizure frequency is related to the menstrual cycle) might experience an increase in seizure frequency in perimenopause and decrease after menopause¹⁰.

Healthcare and treatment

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is a highly successful treatment for common symptoms of menopause¹. There is no known evidence relating to the management of menopause specifically in women with learning disabilities.

Social determinants

Use of HRT varies with socioeconomic and cultural factors¹. The use of HRT in the UK is strongly linked to socioeconomic status, with women of lower socioeconomic status being less likely to use HRT². However, there is no known evidence regarding social determinants and the menopause specifically in women with learning disabilities.

Resources

McCarthy, Michelle and Millard, Lorraine (2017) Supporting women with learning disabilities through the menopause. A manual and training resource for health and social care workers. Pavilion Publishing, Brighton UK, 121 pp. ISBN 9781911028574.

References

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² National Collaborating Centre for Women's and Children's Health (2015) [Menopause: full guideline](#) Clinical Guideline Methods, evidence and recommendations

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⁹ Robertson J and others. Prevalence of epilepsy among people with intellectual disabilities: A systematic review. Seizure: European Journal of Epilepsy, 2015. 29: p. 46-6

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