

Anxiety during the Perimenopause

By Sam Gold

Ordinary anxiety is extremely common; a feeling of unease and worry that comes and goes, often depending on what's going on in your life at the time. It becomes more of a problem when the feelings hang around, the worries become more excessive and seem unsurmountable, and they start to impact on how you live your life.

Feelings of anxiety can range from butterflies in your stomach to sleep problems, restlessness, difficulty concentrating, and a racing heartbeat.

Feeling sad, upset or worried at times are part of being human and these feelings vary over weeks and months, and over the whole course of our lives. It is entirely normal to feel irritable, angry, anxious or low, but during the perimenopause and menopause the normal ranges and frequency of these emotions can change. For some the change can be significant and these feelings can last for a long time.

Anxiety during perimenopause is a common experience for many women. Perimenopause, the transitional phase leading to menopause, is characterised by fluctuating hormone levels, particularly oestrogen and progesterone. These hormonal changes can impact neurotransmitters in the brain, potentially leading to increased feelings of anxiety and stress.

The exact causes of anxiety during perimenopause can vary from person to person. Hormonal fluctuations, combined with other factors such as sleep disturbances, hot flashes, and life changes often associated with ageing, can contribute to heightened anxiety levels.

Here is a brief explanation of your key hormones and the effect they can have on anxiety:

Oestrogen helps regulate several hormones, which may have mood-boosting properties for example serotonin, norepinephrine and dopamine. Oestrogen also helps to support the sharpness of your thinking skills and when levels reduce, it can lead to forgetfulness or brain fog – which can in turn lower your mood.

Progesterone, often referred to as the "calming hormone," plays a crucial role in promoting relaxation and reducing anxiety. As progesterone levels decrease, some women may experience an increase in anxiety symptoms. It is not only vital for regulating the menstrual cycle and supporting pregnancy but also has a calming effect on the brain. It interacts with GABA receptors, which are neurotransmitters that have a relaxing influence on the nervous system. When progesterone levels drop, the balance between excitatory and inhibitory neurotransmitters can be disrupted, potentially leading to heightened anxiety.

Testosterone is another important hormone produced by your ovaries. Levels usually decline during the perimenopause and menopause. Testosterone is thought to have important effects on your mental stamina, quality of sleep, clarity of thought and concentration, which can in turn impact on your wellbeing and levels of stress, when those abilities are impaired. Testosterone also helps improve your libido.

Managing anxiety during perimenopause involves a holistic approach:

1. **A balanced diet.** During perimenopause, maintaining a balanced diet is crucial to support overall health and manage the various symptoms associated with hormonal changes. Focus on incorporating calcium-rich foods such as dairy products, leafy greens, almonds, and fortified foods, along with vitamin D sources like fatty fish and fortified dairy. Opt for whole grains like brown rice and quinoa for sustained energy, and include lean proteins such as poultry, fish, tofu, and legumes for muscle health. Prioritise a variety of colourful fruits and vegetables rich in vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants. Healthy fats from sources like avocados and nuts are essential for brain health and hormone production. Iron, found in lean meats and leafy greens, is crucial, especially if dealing with heavy menstrual bleeding. Additionally, foods high in fibre, like fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes, aid in digestion and promote fullness. Limit sugary and processed foods, and moderate caffeine and alcohol intake. Staying hydrated with water throughout the day is essential, and if you have specific dietary concerns, consider consulting a nutritionist for personalised guidance. Remember, mindful eating and portion control are equally important factors for maintaining a healthy weight and energy levels during perimenopause.
2. **Regular exercise.** Engaging in physical activity can have remarkable effects on anxiety in various ways. It enhances your overall sense of well-being, boosts self-worth, improves body image, and promotes feelings of happiness. Additionally, it diminishes stress and anxiety levels significantly. If you haven't started exercising yet, consider finding small ways to incorporate it into your daily routine. Even if you're feeling tired and lacking energy, taking a short walk outside for just five minutes can make a difference. Simply putting on your trainers and stepping out can be immensely beneficial. Remember, even a brief walk is far better than no exercise at all and can genuinely contribute to making you feel better.
3. **Adequate sleep can significantly impact mood and anxiety levels.**
3. **Stress Reduction Techniques:** Practices like yoga, meditation, deep breathing exercises, and mindfulness can help manage stress and anxiety effectively. There are some really good free meditation Apps you could try
4. **Supportive Social Network:** Talking about your feelings with supportive friends, family, or even a therapist can provide emotional relief.

6. Self-Care: Prioritise self-care activities that bring you joy and relaxation, whether it's reading, hobbies, or spending time with loved ones.

7. Talk to your healthcare provider if you are concerned. For some women, hormone replacement therapy (HRT) can help balance hormone levels, alleviating anxiety symptoms. However, it's crucial to consult a healthcare provider to weigh the risks and benefits and determine if HRT is appropriate.

Remember, every woman's experience with perimenopause is unique. It's essential to be patient with yourself and seek help if anxiety is significantly impacting your quality of life.