- Health self-care

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HEALTH

THE WHO KNEW? GUIDE TO YOUR FUTURE

You don't need an oracle to predict what health challenges may await you! Turn the page for lesser-known issues as you age—plus what to do about them.

BY BETH HOWARD



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HEALTH

Surprises can be fun—

say, for a marriage proposal or when someone shows up at your door with a giant sweepstakes check. But when it comes to health concerns as you age, you'd probably prefer to be prepared. That's why we've put together a decade-by-decade guide to things you may not know to expect and how to get ready for them, mentally and physically.

WHAT TO EXPECT IN YOUR 40s

YOU'VE HEARD...

The changes of perimenopause are on the way, or maybe you're already experiencing them: hot flashes, mood swings, sleep woes, and irregular periods as estrogen fluctuates in the run-up to menopause.

WHAT MAY SURPRISE YOU:

Vaginal dryness can start now, even before menopause hits, leading to problems like painful sex. That's why health care professionals should be talking about this with women in their 40s, says Sheryl Kingsberg, Ph.D., division chief of behavioral medicine in the department of ob/gyn at University Hospitals Cleveland Medical Center and a professor at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine. The gradual loss of estrogen causes vaginal tissues to become thinner, drier, and less pliable. You might even experience tiny breaks in the skin with penetration.

Because low estrogen is responsible, a lubricant or moisturizer may not be sufficient. That's why supplemental vaginal estrogen—via a ring, a vaginal insert, a cream, or a suppository—is the first line of treatment, Kingsberg says. Relatively younger women may not like the idea of hormone therapy, but while use of systemic estrogen combined with a progestogen may raise the risk of breast cancer slightly, estrogen is safe for almost everyone when applied locally because very little of it enters the bloodstream.

Kingsberg also highly recommends using a vaginal moisturizer twice a week to soothe irritated tissues. You'll want a high-quality lubricant for sex too—but give the more "natural"-sounding water-based ones a pass, says Lauren Streicher, M.D., a professor of ob/gyn at Northwestern University and host of the podcast *Come Again*. Water-based lubricant products often contain ingredients such as glycerin

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and propylene glycol that increase their "osmolality"—meaning they will pull moisture out of the cells of the vaginal tissue and actually promote dryness. Instead, choose a silicone-based product or a water-based one with an osmolality rating of less than 380 mOsm/kg, Kingsberg says.

OTHER SMART MOVES FOR WOMEN IN THEIR 40S

DEAL WITH STRESS INCONTINENCE ASAP.

It's common during this decade to start leaking a little when you cough or sneeze because of the effects of

pregnancy, childbirth, and hormonal changes on pelvic floor muscles. Some medications can help, but working with a pelvic floor physical therapist can keep the problem from getting worse with age, says Kingsberg. A weak pelvic floor can be improved with exercises, stretches, hands-on techniques, biofeedback, and electrical stimulation.

ACT NOW FOR BRAIN HEALTH LATER.

Even if the specter of Alzheimer's disease seems years away, research shows that menopause is an early trigger for brain changes that lead to the disease. Your best bet for reducing the risk: Make brain-preserving habits a priority starting now—including cardio exercise, a plant-rich diet, and proper sleep.

STEP UP YOUR PREVENTION GAME.

Now is also the time to start focusing on health issues you'll be at higher risk for as you move through the decades. Make colonoscopies and mammograms part of your wellness routine. And if you're 45 or younger and in the dating world, consider getting the HPV (human papillomavirus) vaccine, which protects against cervical cancers and several other types. Even if you didn't get it as an adolescent, it can still offer some protection, says Scott Roberts, M.D., associate medical director of infection prevention at Yale New Haven Health. "It protects against the genital wart–causing strains of HPV as well as the cancer-causing strains," he adds.

WHAT TO EXPECT IN YOUR 50s

YOU'VE HEARD...

Estrogen protects the heart, and that's a big reason women's risk for cardiovascular disease rises sharply at menopause. In fact, by age 55 more women than men have risk factors like high blood pressure and high LDL cholesterol. So it's time to take steps to safeguard your heart by lowering your blood pressure and cholesterol if needed, getting your blood sugar regulated, exercising most days of the week, sleeping well, keeping your weight at a healthy level, managing stress, staying away from tobacco, and eating meals that are high in plant foods and low in saturated fat.

WHAT MAY SURPRISE YOU:

Pregnancy complications like preeclampsia and eclampsia that you may have experienced decades ago make heart issues more likely as well. They raise the risk of high blood pressure fourfold and double your chance for heart disease and strokes in later life. "It changes the equation for how we think about a woman's risk for developing cardiovascular disease, even if they're way beyond the reproductive years," says Erica Spatz, M.D., an

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associate professor of cardiology and epidemiology at Yale School of Medicine. It's important to let your doctor know about this aspect of your medical history so they can monitor your health more closely, especially as you may well have changed doctors since your baby-having years. And watching your heart health has added payoffs for your brain, recent research shows: The more closely you adhere to heart-healthy habits in midlife, the lower your risk for dementia in your later years.

OTHER SMART MOVES FOR WOMEN IN THEIR 50S

▶ PROTECT YOURSELF AGAINST PNEUMONIA.

The CDC now recommends a pneumonia shot for people 50 and over, on top of getting a flu shot each year.

▶ KEEP SHINGLES ON THE ROOF.

Because when they're on your skin, they're not only painful but also can lead to complications like vision impairment. The two-shot shingles vaccine



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LEVI BROWN/TRUNK ARCHIVE.

(Shingrix) is recommended for people in their 50s—it prevents the reactivation of the dormant virus in people who have had chicken pox.

▶ DO A SUPPLEMENT CHECK WITH YOUR DOC.

At around age 50 you can begin to produce less stomach acid, and the acid is needed to break down foods to let you absorb vitamin B_{12}, so you may want to talk to your doctor about supplements of the vitamin. You may also need a vitamin D supplement because your body is less able to produce it through sunlight exposure than those of younger people.

WHAT TO EXPECT IN YOUR 60s

YOU'VE HEARD...

To keep your brain sharp, you need to challenge it. When you take up a new activity such as painting, dancing, pickleball, or learning a language, your brain churns out new neural connections that help keep it young.

WHAT MAY SURPRISE YOU:

Loneliness and isolation are big contributors to cognitive decline, dementia, and other issues including cardiovascular disease and stroke, type 2 diabetes, depression and anxiety, and even earlier death. It's not just that kids (if you've had them) have flown the nest—this is the life stage when many women leave the workforce, face divorce or a partner's death, or move to a new place.

"Many women in their 60s and beyond find it really hard to make new friends," says Gail Saltz, M.D., a clinical associate professor of psychiatry at Weill-Cornell Medical College and a psychoanalyst with the New York Psychoanalytic Society & Institute. "It takes a serious, concerted effort and putting yourself out there, which can be harder to do at this stage because there are fewer natural touchpoints."

If you're on the hunt for a new place to live, consider one with high walkability so you'll be more likely to rub elbows with potential new friends. Consider joining groups related to your passions while embracing the casual connections of everyday life (by chatting up the barista at your favorite coffee shop or the person next to you in line, for instance). Research shows that people who have more of these types of interactions score higher on measures of life satisfaction. They also get a brain boost.

"Unexpected interactions—in which a person tells you something and you have to say something back, so you're thinking on your feet—provide exactly the kind of stimulus that's good for a brain in terms of staving off cognitive decline," says Dr. Saltz.

OTHER SMART MOVES FOR WOMEN IN THEIR 60S

STEP UP YOUR EXERCISE.

Moving regularly also boosts cognitive function. To make sure your body will be good for the long haul, focus on functional movement, the kind that helps you with day-to-day tasks. The big goals now are grip strength, a marker for overall muscle strength, and joint flexibility, which a recent study linked to a longer life. "People who are more flexible tend to have a better chance to recover their balance when they're unstable, and in case of a fall they would be less prone to getting severely injured," says study author Claudio Gil Araujo, M.D., Ph.D., dean of research

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and education at Clinimex, Clínica de Medicina do Exercício in Brazil.

SPARK A LAGGING LIBIDO.

Having more time and fewer distractions can often lead to a greater interest in sex (which may be why approximately 60% of people in their 60s are sexually active). If your libido is lackluster, ask your doctor about proven treatments, including additional systemic testosterone and local vaginal DHEA, as well as the nonhormonal medication flibanserin (Addyi). Approved for premenopausal women in the U.S., Addyi can also be prescribed to postmenopausal women off-label, says James Simon, M.D., a professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the George Washington University School of Medicine. Also potentially helpful, he says, is the antidepressant bupropion (Wellbutrin): "It has positive effects, principally on arousal and orgasm." And at low doses, trazodone (Desyrel), another antidepressant often used as a sleep aid, may raise sexual desire.

STOCK UP ON CONDOMS.

Yes, really. Though you don't have to worry about getting pregnant, be aware that sexually transmitted infections among adults 65 and older have more than doubled in the U.S. in the past decade. Practice safe sex, and be sure to see the gynecologist every year to check your STI status (sometimes there are no symptoms) as well as to head off other common problems such as pelvic organ prolapse, says Kingsberg.

WHAT TO EXPECT IN YOUR 70s AND BEYOND

YOU'VE HEARD...

Our senses of hearing and sight can naturally start to dim, but hearing aids are better and less expensive than ever before. And your eye doctor may recommend cataract surgery, which not only clears the cloudiness but also corrects your vision, meaning you may no longer need glasses or contacts.

WHAT MAY SURPRISE YOU:

The ramifications of hearing problems are more far-reaching than was previously known: Failing to get hearing aids when they are needed—or not wearing them when one has them—has been linked to isolation, dementia, and even a shorter lifespan.

Beyond the health problems that can stem from isolation, hearing problems can have an impact on how you care for yourself. "If you're not hearing as well, you can't take in, understand, or remember what your doctor told you to do, so you're less likely to treat your health issues properly," says Melissa Karp, Au.D., an audiologist in Charlotte, NC. "You also have an increased fall risk." There's a similar impact

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CREVIS/ADOBE.

when you don't correct your vision.

Keep in mind that hearing aids need to be fitted properly, adjusted, and objectively verified to work well. "The reason a lot of people don't like theirs is that they're either overamplifying or underamplifying because they weren't fitted correctly in the first place," Karp says. And if you're embarrassed to need them, don't be. "You see people wearing earbuds and huge headphones all the time, and hearing aids are actually a lot less noticeable," Karp says. "And I always tell patients that people are much more likely to notice your hearing loss than your hearing aids."

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OTHER SMART MOVES FOR WOMEN AGE 70-PLUS

GET CREATIVE IN BED.

Intercourse may be less comfortable these days—without local hormone therapy, vulvar and vaginal tissue weakens, and the vagina shortens and narrows in the later decades of life, says Kingsberg. But that doesn't have to stop you from being intimate, and it might even lead you to broaden your repertoire of sexual expression. A gynecologist can be a vital resource when it comes to your love life, but if yours doesn't acknowledge your concerns or offer help, change doctors. "Sexuality is important to everyone's physical health and quality of life, no matter what their age," says Kingsberg.

RELAX ABOUT YOUR WEIGHT.

Research suggests that it's fine to carry a little bit of extra girth, assuming you are not obese to start with. In fact, being a little heavier protects the body from an early death; both thinner and much larger body types have a greater mortality risk. Talk to your doctor about a healthy weight range for you.

BOOST YOUR BALANCE.

Falls can have life-changing consequences, so be sure to include balance training in your exercise routine. This includes movements like standing on one leg and walking heel-to-toe. Also check for fall hazards like throw rugs, and find ways to make your home safer.

To dig deeper on the menopause transition, visit prevention.com/menopause-answers.

YOUR OVARIES MAY BE THE KEY TO HOW YOU AGE

At her lab at the Buck Institute for Research on Aging in Novato, CA, Jennifer Garrison, Ph.D., investigates ovarian aging, which has far-reaching consequences for women's health in the later decades of life. Here's what her work, and research from many others, shows.

>> When ovaries age, things start to go south

Why? The ovaries are endocrine organs, "producing dozens, if not hundreds, of hormones—in addition to estrogen and progesterone—that are signaling like a second brain to almost every tissue in a woman's body," says Garrison. Your ovaries "communicate with your bones, heart, liver, muscles, and skin"

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through chemical messengers, and ovaries promote health at every age. Heart disease and osteoporosis have been linked to the drop in estrogen as women reach menopause—and brain health may worsen as well. "There are risks associated with the changes in the ovaries, including cognitive decline, which can set the stage for Alzheimer's disease," Garrison explains.

Ovaries age faster than nearly every other organ

They age "at about two and a half times the rate of the other tissues in the body," Garrison says, setting the pace for aging overall. "This likely has big consequences for health span, the time we remain healthy and free from disease. Women have shorter health spans than men at baseline."

Menopause makes your body age faster

When your ovarian function declines, Garrison says the rate of aging of other tissues in your body can increase—menopause can hasten your cells' aging rate by almost 6%. This means that you may notice significant changes in how well you feel overall.

What this research means for you

We know that the older a woman is when she goes through menopause, the longer she is likely to live, Garrison says. Now her lab is exploring whether slowing ovarian aging might keep women healthier longer as well. But each woman has her own aging journey. "Hormone therapy may help, though our knowledge about it is incomplete," Garrison says. "My vision is that there will eventually be a menu of options for women, including lifestyle changes—nutrition and exercise—and medications that would help to preserve ovaries' function into older age."

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