

CTV Mid-Life Matters by Dr Vicki Holmes, January 2016

### **Is It Early Menopause or Primary Ovarian Insufficiency?**

Some women stop having their periods much younger than most women. There are two different conditions that may cause this, depending on age; Primary Ovarian Insufficiency (POI) for women younger than 40 years of age, or Early Menopause for women 40 to 45 years of age.

Primary Ovarian Insufficiency only occurs in 1% of the population, however it is very important to have this assessed by a doctor, as it may be caused by several diseases. It may be the result of genetic abnormalities (such as Turner Syndrome or Fragile X Syndrome), autoimmune diseases (such as Rheumatoid Arthritis), metabolic disorders (such as Hypothyroidism, adrenal disease), chemotherapy or radiation. However, for 90% of the cases of POI, no reason can be identified. In any case, this needs to be checked out.

If you are between the ages of 40 and 45, the condition is called Early Menopause. This is when you stop having periods for more than 12 months, which occurs in 5% of women in this age group.

For both these problems, the symptoms are the same as regular menopause; hot flushes, insomnia, emotional swings, sexual changes etc., and the treatment is similar. **The important message for today is that both these cases require treatment with hormone therapy at least until the age of 50.**

The reason these women require hormone treatment is that they are at greater risk for several diseases. Osteoporosis has been found to be more prevalent in untreated POI. We usually build our peak bone mass up to the age of 35, then experience a gradual decline until menopause when there is a relatively sudden drop in bone mass density (BMD). If you never achieve your peak BMD, your risks of fracture are higher. Increased cholesterol levels, which normally happen at menopause, occurs earlier in these women, and their risk of heart disease is higher. Cognitive dysfunction, mood changes and sexual problems can also occur if they do not have these hormones replaced.

The Women's Health Initiative was a large health study, reported in 2003 that made some recommendations which, since then, in many ways has been refuted. Due to that study, there is still the notion among many health professionals that you should not be on hormones longer than 5 years. **In the case of early menopause, this does not apply.** Women who have this condition have much lower levels of hormones than women without it. The hormone therapy we use to treat these women produces much lower levels than other women or their age, not experiencing early menopause and the benefits far outweigh the potential risks.

If you are one of these women with POI or Early Menopause who is not receiving hormone replacement treatment, I encourage you to discuss this with your doctor.

Here are some useful websites:

- [www.hormone.org](http://www.hormone.org) - search for Primary Ovarian Insufficiency
- [nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/poi](http://nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/poi)
- [www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/premature-ovarian-failure](http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/premature-ovarian-failure)