

MENOPAUSE

Statement

HON LORNA HARPER (East Metropolitan) [6.25 pm]: I rise tonight to talk about a subject that is probably close to the heart of myself and a few other females in Parliament. I am here to talk about menopause. The reason I am talking about menopause is that it is one of those taboo subjects that apparently we are not meant to talk about, that we do not talk about in polite society. Well, I am of the “don’t be too polite, girl” model of society now and I say it is time to talk about it.

We were lucky the other week to have a visit from the Menopause Alliance. As a female in her 50s, I should know more about menopause than I actually do. I do not. It was really good to sit and talk to these people who are out there. Menopause Alliance Australia was founded to empower women and improve their quality of life before, during and after menopause. Menopause Alliance Australia believes that no woman should be left behind. Its vision is to free women from the stigma of menopause and give them encouragement and support to seek help. Its mission is to remove the myths and barriers for treatments and therapies that address the symptoms of menopause so women can lead a full and productive life.

But what is menopause? Well, it is myriad things. Mainly, it literally refers to the last normal menstrual period a woman experiences. It is a gradual process, although the symptoms may persist for a number of years. Menopause is said to have taken place when a woman has not had a period for 12 months. As we age, the number of eggs in our ovaries reduce until finally they are gone. Normally the developing eggs produce oestrogen, which is a hormone that keeps many tissues and organs young and vital. I still think I am young and vital sometimes, but not first thing in the morning.

The falling levels of oestrogen actually cause some unpleasant symptoms. For most, the symptoms are quite mild but for some they are very severe. It usually occurs between the ages of 45 and 55, with the average age being 51. It can occur earlier due to illness, cancer treatments or some other reasons. Historically, we did not live that long, so when women reached the age of 50, we did not live much beyond it, but now, as we have moved through society, we actually live a lot longer. It is surprising to know that women actually spend approximately 30 per cent of their lives being oestrogen depleted. It is also important to recognise that menopause will affect all biological women regardless of race, sexual identity or social background, so it does not matter who you are or where you come from, it is going to get you.

The symptoms of menopause are wide, varied and oh so joyful for all women. Everybody is different but some of the symptoms—I am not saying these are all the symptoms—are hot flushes, night sweats, muscle and joint aches and pains, heart palpitations, sleep disturbance, anxiety, difficulty concentrating, feeling tense, dry or itchy skin, headaches and migraines, brain fog—we love that one—thinning hair, fatigue, bloating, feeling dizzy or faint, loss of confidence, lethargy and tiredness, feeling unhappy or depressed, feeling teary and mood changes.

Unfortunately, for a lot of women today, menopause usually hits when their kids become teenagers. Women get bombarded with not only their hormones and everything else going on in their body, but also with teenagers. For women who are going through menopause and also have a teenage daughter, it is a triple whammy. They are getting it left, right and centre.

On a more serious note, sometimes women going through menopause are not productive in the workplace. That sounds weird, but sometimes women feel that they cannot go to work because when they cannot concentrate or string a sentence together and they are hot and then cold and then itchy, they find it really hard to be productive. Some women retire or take a lot of time off sick. That is sad to see because in the workplace and in society we do not talk about menopause. People ignore that menopause is occurring and they will just carry on with life as though it is not happening. As a society, it is important to acknowledge that, biologically, all women will go through menopause when they reach a certain age. It is good for the men in their lives to be educated about why their wife is hot one minute and cold the next and why she has the doona on and also the air conditioner. There is a reason. My husband thinks it is weird that when I drive to work I have the heater on for my feet, but I do not like my face being hot so I have the window and sunroof open when it is four or five degrees outside. I think it is great but he thinks it is nuts. Then again, if we talk about these things more, they will become more normal and people will be able to say that they are menopausal without feeling embarrassed.

There are also some very serious long-term health effects of menopause. They include osteoporosis, cardiovascular disease, obesity, diabetes, depression, dementia and colon cancer. The joy of our hormones disappearing and then getting hit with all that as well—thank you, thank you, thank you!

I told a few of my colleagues about a double-page spread article in *The West Australian* today about a footballer who has broken his arm. I feel bad for him. There was also an article about a study into menopause and it is very small and hard to find. It was titled “Hot flush risk”. Whoever wrote it must think that having a hot flush is fun.

Hot flushes, which affect most menopausal women, can raise the risk of heart disease and diabetes. If left untreated, it can lead to metabolic syndrome, with symptoms such as high cholesterol levels that can potentially trigger heart disease, type 2 diabetes and strokes. Researchers from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, which examined 825 healthy women between 40 and 65 years of age over 15 years, presented their findings to the European Congress on Menopause and Andropause. There are a couple of words here that I cannot pronounce, so I will not even try. Again, an article on a predominantly female issue is only a few lines long and hidden on page 39 of the newspaper. This is an issue that will affect all women of that age, whereas, as bad as I feel for him, a young footballer who has broken his arm gets a double-page spread. That shows us that we have not moved forward.

Tonight I am here to say that I am at one stage of menopause. I have no idea which one, because I do not know enough about it. I get hot and cold and tired and grumpy and I have brain fog and my arms get itchy—it is everything. This is a natural part of life and we should not be embarrassed to talk about it. We should be out there saying that the next time I am sitting here sweating and members are roasting, it is either my diabetes or menopause; it will be one of the two, but I am hot and you are not. Just please be aware and be a bit more patient. Do not be afraid to talk about it and please visit the Menopause Alliance Australia website. Members can donate to it to help it do more research. If someone says that they are menopausal, do not snigger and do not make jokes about being too hot. We do not have a sense of humour about these things when we are menopausal. Do not make jokes, but get out there and talk about it. The more we normalise it, the better it will be for all women and then the next time we get some important research, we might actually get a double-page spread rather than a tiny paragraph.