

**HOLISTIC HEALTH**

# **AYURVEDA AND WOMEN'S HEALTH: MENOPAUSE**



**THE BODY AGENCY**



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# Menopause

**Ayurveda looks at menopause as a natural evolutionary stage in our biological development, not something to be feared or stigmatized. That development links four key things: Doshas (constitutions), Agni (digestion), Ama (toxins), and the stage of life.**

Doshas refer to how Ayurveda understands our unique mind/body type. Agni is the transformative heat in the body that digests what we eat (food) and what we think (our thoughts). In line with Agni, Ama is linked with toxic material (physical and emotional), which is also very important.

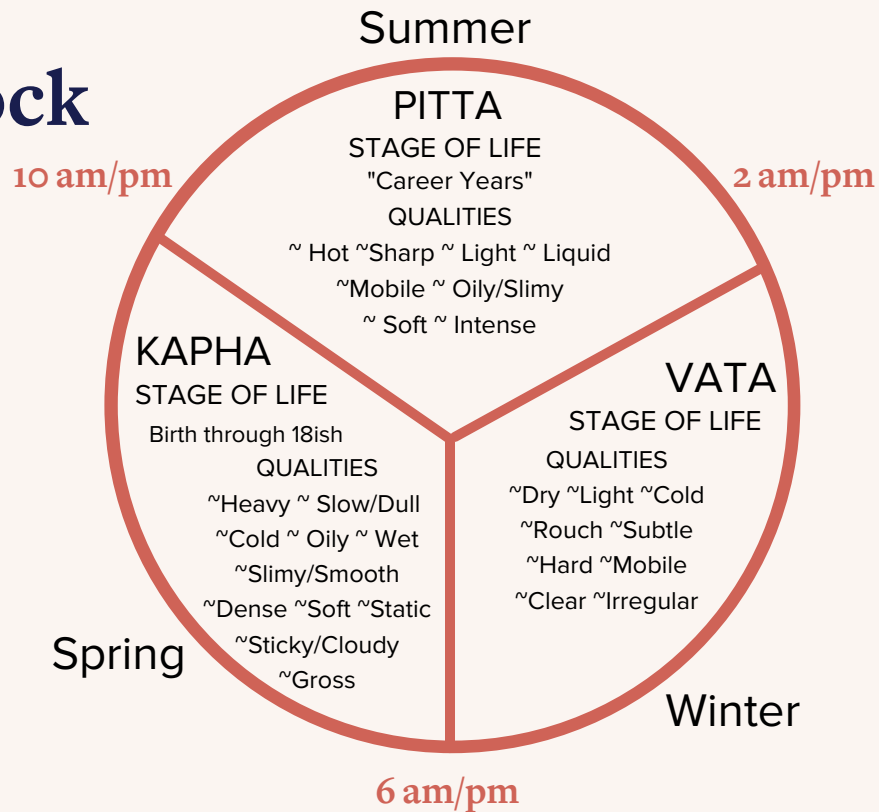
When we can digest our food with ease, our Agni is balanced, which in turn creates little Ama. If we have any digestive or evacuation distress, Ama is created, leading to issues with our joints, lethargy, mind fog, dullness in our senses, sticky sweet taste in the mouth, halitosis, poor circulation, and a host of other issues.

Our unique mind/body type (Dosha) helps us understand how our digestion (Agni) works with toxins (Ama) as a way to better navigate the different stages of our lives.



# The Ayurvedic Clock

One of my favorite ways to understand Ayurveda is to think of a 24 hour clock. The Ayurvedic Clock offers us an approachable way to think of this vast field of medicine. Each season of the year, each hour of the day, and each stage of our life is assigned to a particular Dosha. This is because of the attributes that make up each Dosha.



## Let's look at the stages of development.

From birth through childhood, we are building tissue, growing and developing— from our bones to our brains. Our ability to digest life (make sense of things) is not as strong in childhood as it will be when we are adults. So in childhood, it's important to have safe and wise adults to help us make sense of our experiences, thoughts and feelings. This is the Kapha time of life.

As soon as a girl has her first period, she begins her transition from childhood to adulthood. This transition generally occurs over 10 years. And, as with all change, it's messy! This transition, and a woman's next transition from reproductive focus to menopause, can create some havoc in our lives. We move from what we know, our daily habits, into something new. We start our monthly cycles or end our monthly cycles. There is also the transition from woman to mother, a whole phase within itself. When we move through these transitions, we can experience changes in our body, mind, and mood/emotions. Often we call these dysregulations, symptoms, yet they are generally a normal side effect of the hormonal changes in our system.

As we move into adulthood, our biology amps up with hormones to support procreation. It puts estrogen and testosterone in the driver seat. At this stage of our lives, our digestive Agni (fire) is at its highest so we tend to be more goal oriented, driven and focused on achievements. Our adulthood, and throughout our midlife, is governed by Pitta.

As the clock turns from Pitta to the next Dosha, Vata, we go through perimenopause to transition from the intensity of hormones driving our biology into the light and mobile qualities of Vata. Ayurveda sees this transition as a gateway to support spiritual practice and introspection.

Earlier in life we were growing (Kapha) and achieving (Pitta) and now we have the opportunity to feel spacious, light and enjoy the opportunity to indulge our heart's desire, or dharma. If only everyone could describe menopause this way! From the start of perimenopause into menopause, it's important to remember to be good stewards of our digestion (Agni) as it can become irregular. This is why women often speak about hot flashes, weight fluctuation, skin elasticity and dryness, hair loss and brain fog or spaciness. This is the Vata stage.

In this Vata stage of life we cannot rely on the substance of Kapha and the natural heat in Pitta. Instead, we must lean into our diet and daily habits to support our physical health and mental wellness, which can be true of every stage in our life. We can go through this transition with greater ease when we support ourselves with simple daily routines, including eating seasonally harvested food, and reconnecting with nature and her natural rhythms.



# Vata and Menopause

Ayurveda understands that there is no one size fits all for menopause. It acknowledges that each individual has a specific combination of Kapha, Pitta, and Vata, which explains the variation women experience during this transition. This combination of Doshas is our special sauce. Ayurveda calls this our constitution or prakruti. While we never change our constitution, the stages of development cast a different focus on our biological and mental functioning.



For example, when the sex hormones are in charge (the Pitta stage of life) we engage differently with drive and capacity. So, when estrogen and her pal progesterone “move out” of our system we will naturally experience a change. We call this change menopause, identified as starting one year after the last menstrual period. This transition, starting with perimenopause, can last for up to 10 years, although it is generally shorter

Symptoms of discomfort in perimenopause occur due to the past action of our diet, lifestyle and hormonal health. But this is a natural and healthy transition, and we can benefit from anticipating the decrease in progesterone and estrogen from our midlife levels. This often sudden drop in sex hormones can create a cascade of changes in both our tissues and in our ability to think and remember. Estrogen has a natural building quality, so when it starts to drop off in our body we will naturally notice irregularities from our midlife functioning— changes in body temperature, skin moisture, elasticity, vaginal lubrication, hair loss, bone density changes, and mood might become irregular. Most of these symptoms will pass, and when we pay attention to counter balancing the light, dry, rough, mobile, irregular attributes of Vata, we can manage these symptoms with greater efficiency.



To better understand the variation in menopausal experience we need to look back to the concept of the Vata, Pitta and Kapha Doshas. Ayurveda views the variation in symptoms not just from past habits and diet but also as a manifestation of subtle imbalances already present in our biology that estrogen and progesterone were helping us manage. If we look at the menopausal symptoms by constitution, we can get a handle on some of the daily habits and dietary supports that can help us manage our transition.

## VATA WOMEN

Vata women often have a lighter bone structure, tend to have thinner hair, are either very tall or very short, smaller eyes, tend to have irregular symmetry, and often hyper mobile joints. They may have more menopausal symptoms because they don't have the inherent durability of the other constitutions.

Vata women have greater adaptive ability, yet in the Vata stage of life, durability (Kapha) and warmth (Pitta) help them navigate perimenopause with greater ease. The tendency for Vata constitutions in menopause is to become nervous, lose skin tone and often have more mood swings. They may experience more irregular periods in perimenopause, along with constipation, bloating and insomnia. Heart palpitations, vaginal dryness and joint pain may also manifest if daily routines and diets are not attended to earlier in midlife, or are not managed well in this transition.

### Vata, manage your tendency to be light, mobile, dry and irregular with your diet!

1. Warm, moist foods are magic for calming down symptoms by supporting ease and regulation of digestion. Using warming spices like cinnamon, turmeric, cumin and fennel, adding them to a little ghee (clarified butter) when preparing your meals can support warmth and moisture.

2. Eat regularly! Vata loves to graze, and snack, especially on crunchy foods. Yet, working to take in three meals a day, with the largest at mid-day will truly support your blood sugar, energy level and nourish your body for greater durability. If possible decrease late night snacking.

3. Drink moisturizing teas like licorice root, marshmallow root and vanilla bean combined together. Let go of ice in all drinks.

## PITTA WOMEN

Pitta dominate women generally have symmetrical characteristics, often medium sized bones and joints, and often have a more athletic build. They can have freckled skin or skin that is easy to burn, an intense color or green eyes, sometimes red hair, and smooth skin. The hair will often lose its color early and sometimes hair loss is more profound for Pitta types.



As this Dosha has both fire and moisture, there is more inherent durability and capacity than in Vata types. Yet due to the fire element hitting the Vata stage of life we often see that quality as the culprit of their menopausal symptoms. Often skin issues such as rosacea or acne will emerge in perimenopause, as well as urinary tract infections, hot flashes, heavier bleeding, night sweats. There may even be angry agitation, hot head, tendency with mood dysregulation. Skin can become hot and dry and irregular vaginal moisture can occur due to the fire element. If Pitta dominate women can allow themselves to take a little rest in their midlife, decrease self-critical tendency and practice more self-compassion, they can decrease some of their undesirable symptoms. Of course, daily diet support with less alcohol and other fermented beverages will also support decreased symptoms in this transition.

## Pitta, manage your tendency to get hot, sharp and inflamed with diet!

Pitta diet is designed to manage symptoms including, but not limited to, supporting proper cooling and softening for digestion to become regular and to decrease stimulation that gets her all heated up. As with all Doshas, eating what is in season is key for a balanced diet that keeps us in alignment with nature herself. Pitta women tend to get hot easily, yet they love it! So asking them to cool off can be tricky. Here are three tips to cool and soothe the Pitta symptoms of transition.



1. Begin to drink cooling beverages (no ice) or room temperature teas such as hibiscus, chamomile, or raspberry. Sweet tastes like watermelon, and astringent tastes like cucumber water (especially in the summer) will also help to keep your Agni kindled without overheating.

2. When in doubt, add ghee (clarified butter) to your meal. Use it in place of your cooking oil. Try it on your popcorn! It is even better if you add some cooling, or astringent and bitter, herbs like tarragon, basil, or coriander. Let the seed or dried herb open up in the ghee while heating it. Ayurveda uses culinary spices as the first source of medication to bring balance when we are experiencing imbalances. The good news is that ghee has no milk fats, and has naturally cooling and nourishing qualities.





3. Slow down... sit down. Be in a harmonious or pleasant environment when you eat your meals. I know Pitta women like to be efficient, and often they eat on the run, or while multitasking. Yet this does not signal to the digestive system to rest and digest, and that signal to your parasympathetic system is important for mood stabilization and proper, easy digestion.

## KAPHA WOMEN

Kapha dominate women have the most durability and strength of all three constitutions. Often, these inherent qualities can offer a less symptomatic perimenopause. A Kapha woman often has a larger frame, with thick lustrous hair. She might have softer features, deep set joints and a curvy figure. Her eyes will often be larger with very white sclera and be deep blue or brown in color. Her skin is thicker often very pale or softer brown in color. Kapha is the building Dosha, so the symptoms that tend to arise in perimenopause for this woman highlight this tendency. She might find that her skin is more oily, notice fluid retention around joints and experience possible weight gain. She might notice a lack of motivation to start projects, a sense of feeling lazy or lethargic. Often perimenopause in Kapha types may look like depression or feel like brain fog, yet they can simply be slowing down. It is important for Kapha women to manage their daily routine with appropriate movement to support stimulating the tendency of this Dosha to be more stable. Daily diet support is important as this Dosha has a slower or dull Agni (digestive fire) and an avoidance of pungent tastes that would stimulate the digestion of foods, thoughts and feelings.



## Kapha, manage your tendency to get heavy, oily and dull with diet!

1. In Vata time of life (perimenopause-menopause) Kapha's qualities are a natural counterbalance. Vata is light dry and mobile, while Kapha is wet and steady. Yet they are both cold in nature, so adding some heat is very helpful to keep the digestion in balance. Adding in culinary spices that are warming like pepper mustard seed can stimulate digestion as can pungent roots like turmeric, garlic and onions.



2. Once again, take your meals cooked (no microwaves in Ayurveda) and try to avoid raw foods, unless in summer. Why? While raw foods like carrots and salads are great for Kapha in moderation, they require a large amount of digestive power to break down. When Kapha women are experiencing an imbalance, we don't want to tax their digestion as it is not as strong as Pitta, and not as easily stimulated as Vata.

3. Try something sour; lemons, limes and fermented foods like kombucha. The sour taste is very stimulating and can pick up a sluggish and dull digestion. One caution, use in moderation, as too much sour can build up water and Kapha women can retain water in menopause.



# SO...

After reading this, you will probably identify yourself in more than one of these Doshas and that is normal. Dual Dosha is the most common presentation of Ayurveda constitution. Just to add to the fun, Ayurveda has 7 possible constitutions; Vata, Pitta, Kapha dominate or the single Dosha. Vata-Pitta, Vata-Kapha, Pitta-Kapha dominate or Vata-Pitta-Kapha all equal parts.



To find out more, or for support to bring your constitution back to balance, book a consultation with [The Body Agency's Ayurveda consultant](#).