



# I'M ALL ABOUT GENITOURINARY SYNDROME OF MENOPAUSE

## THE CANBERRA MENOPAUSE CENTRE

The Canberra Menopause Centre is a dedicated service for those seeking information, support, and medical management of menopause. It is staffed by experienced female doctors who have a special interest in this area.

## WHAT A CONSULTATION MAY INCLUDE:

- Information and discussion of how menopause symptoms may affect you, for example: hot flushes, night sweats, insomnia, mood changes, and sexual difficulties.
- Information regarding beneficial lifestyle choices to improve cardiovascular health, and bone health.
- Assessment and treatment of menopausal symptoms.
- The current understanding of the role of complementary and alternative therapies.
- Information about, and prescription of, hormone replacement therapy, and non-hormonal prescription treatments for menopause symptoms.
- Information about prescription of contraception during the peri-menopause.
- Assessment and management of mood symptoms including pharmacological and non-pharmacological options.
- With your consent we will liaise with your treating GP regarding the outcome of your consultation.
- Follow up to assess the effectiveness of your individual treatment plan.

## MAKING AN APPOINTMENT

You may self-refer to the service or request a referral by your treating GP. We request that you complete a medical information questionnaire prior to attending the initial doctor's appointment. To ensure that our doctors with a special interest in menopause have the opportunity to discuss your concerns, we offer longer appointments.

For more details contact us during office hours on **02 6247 3077** or email [shfpact@shfpact.org.au](mailto:shfpact@shfpact.org.au)

VISIT THE CANBERRA MENOPAUSE CENTRE WEBSITE AT [shfpact.org.au/menopause-centre-of-canberra](http://shfpact.org.au/menopause-centre-of-canberra)

## OPENING HOURS

Please contact our reception staff on 02 6247 3077 or visit [shfpact.org.au](http://shfpact.org.au) for SHFPACT clinic hours

## LOCATION

SHFPACT is conveniently located in the city.

Level 1,  
28 University Avenue  
Canberra ACT 2601

## CONTACT

02 6247 3077  
[shfpact@shfpact.org.au](mailto:shfpact@shfpact.org.au)  
0400 770 999 (SMS ONLY)

## ENGAGE

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## DONATE

All donations to SHFPACT over \$2.00 are tax deductible

## SHFPACT CLINICAL SERVICES

- Contraceptive advice, information & services
- IUD's and other long acting contraceptive options
- Cervical screening
- Canberra Menopause Centre
- Unplanned Pregnancy Counselling Service
- Sexually transmissible infections (STIs): testing, treatment and advice
- Blood borne virus and HIV testing
- Emergency contraception (the 'Morning After' Pill)
- Breast checks and breast awareness education
- Fertility issues and pre-conception Advice
- Sexual difficulties and sexuality education
- PrEP information, advice, and prescription



Sexual Health and Family Planning ACT  
Level 1, 28 University Ave, Canberra City  
Call 02 6247 3077 • SMS 0400 770 999  
or email [shfpact@shfpact.org.au](mailto:shfpact@shfpact.org.au)

# shfpact.org.au

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## WHAT IS GENITOURINARY SYNDROME OF MENOPAUSE?

Genitourinary Syndrome of Menopause, or GSM is a term used to describe the changes that can occur in the vulva, vagina, urethra, and bladder when you reach menopause.

These changes are common and occur more than 50% of the time following menopause.

Symptoms of GSM can occur following natural menopause or surgical menopause. Unlike other symptoms of menopause such as hot flushes and night sweats, which can improve over time, symptoms of GSM usually persist and may possibly worsen.

GSM can cause significant discomfort and distress, and it is important that it is diagnosed and managed appropriately to reduce symptoms and improve quality of life.

## WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF GSM?

Symptoms vary between individuals but can include:

- Vulval and vaginal irritation, pain, itching, or burning.
- Vaginal dryness.
- Discomfort and pain with penetrative sex.
- Persistent discharge which has an offensive smell.
- Light bleeding as the tissues of the vagina become more fragile (if you have any bleeding post menopause it is very important to see a doctor and have this investigated).
- Weaker pelvic floor muscles that can cause urinary leakage when you cough, sneeze, jog etc.
- Bladder symptoms such as pain when your bladder is full, urgency when you need to pass urine (needing to rush to the toilet), and pain passing urine.

## WHAT CAUSES GSM?

The symptoms caused by GSM are due to decreased levels of the hormone oestrogen after menopause.

Oestrogen is important in maintaining the health of your vulva, vagina, and bladder.

Oestrogen keeps the tissue of these areas thick and elastic, and when the levels of oestrogen decrease the tissues become thinner, dryer, and less elastic.

The pH of the vagina also changes with decreased oestrogen, and this can cause urinary tract infections, as well as a condition called bacterial vaginosis (BV), which is an imbalance in the bacteria which live in the vagina.

## HOW DO YOU MANAGE IT?

There are several ways that the symptoms of GSM can be managed and improved:

### • PERSONAL LUBRICANTS

The use of a lubricant during sex is very important to make sex more comfortable. Lubricants are either water based or silicone based. Personal preference is important, and you may need to try a few to find one that works well for you. Silicone lubricants can provide a higher level of lubrication however, they do not have moisturising properties.

Water based lubricants can either provide lubrication only or can also act as a moisturiser. Using a lubricant which is also a vaginal moisturiser can be very helpful by reducing dryness as well as providing lubrication. There are several brands of lubricant available which offer both lubrication and moisturising. If irritation and sensitivity are a problem for you then you may want to use a lubricant for sensitive skin.

Natural oils such as sweet almond oil, coconut oil, or light olive oil can also be used as vaginal moisturisers and for lubrication. Any safe liquid substance which you find works for you is fine as well. Remember that if you are using condoms you need to avoid using oil as it can increase the risk of condoms breaking.

### • VAGINAL MOISTURISERS

As discussed above there are water based vaginal lubricants and natural oils which also act as a vaginal moisturiser. There are also products designed specifically as vaginal moisturisers, such as Replens®. This is available in individual applicators which are inserted into the vagina. Each application lasts about 3 days. Replens® is available through pharmacies as a 10 pack or 3 pack.

### • VAGINAL OESTROGEN

The hormone oestrogen is available in a cream or in pessaries. These are inserted into the vagina and can be very effective at reducing or relieving the symptoms of GSM. There is almost no absorption of the oestrogen into the body, so it only acts on the local tissues, and there is also no need to take progesterone as is often the case if you are using Menopause Hormone Therapy. Both the cream and pessaries are available on prescription from your doctor. They are usually used every night for the first two weeks then two to three times a week ongoing. Vaginal oestrogen can be used alone or in combination with Menopause Hormone Therapy.

### • MENOPAUSE HORMONE THERAPY (MHT)

Menopause Hormone Therapy (also known as hormone replacement therapy or HRT) is the use of hormones (usually oestrogen and progesterone) in the form of a patch, gel, or tablet. It is most often used to relieve the other symptoms of menopause such as hot flushes and night sweats but can also be effective in reducing the symptoms of GSM. Menopause Hormone Therapy is only available on prescription.

**You would need to discuss the use of MHT with your GP or make an appointment with one of the doctors at the Canberra Menopause Centre to discuss your suitability for MHT. Call 6247 3077.**

### • VAGINAL LASER TREATMENT

Laser treatments for GSM have been available in Australia for a few years, however there is currently little evidence for the effectiveness of these treatments. There are some clinical trials underway.



## SEX AFTER MENOPAUSE

Although GSM can impact on your sex life, you can continue to enjoy a pleasurable and satisfying sex life with appropriate management of symptoms, and to have and enjoy penetrative sex if you wish to. Penetrative sex has been shown to assist in keeping the vagina healthy and the vaginal tissues more elastic. It's also important to remember that penetrative sex is only a part of sex and intimacy, and if penetration is too uncomfortable then there are many other ways to enjoy sexual pleasure and closeness with a partner. Cuddling, massage, stroking, and mutual masturbation are just some of the ways to do this. Open communication between you and your partner is very important of course and can be the key to maintaining intimacy and a pleasurable sex life for many years to come. Dr Rosie King's books: Good Loving, Great Sex, and Where Did My Libido Go? are very useful books that discuss a lot of these issues and have very helpful suggestions.

If you find that you are having ongoing difficulties around sex, then talking to a sex therapist may be very useful. SHFPACT doctors and nurses can give you further information about this and about sex therapists in the Canberra region.

## WHAT ABOUT THE URINARY SYMPTOMS?

Urinary symptoms may include a weaker pelvic floor, urinary leakage, urgency (needing to rush to the toilet), pain when your bladder is full, pain on urination, and getting up more frequently at night (nocturia). If you have any of these symptoms it is important to discuss them with your GP or a Canberra Menopause Centre doctor. Some of the treatments discussed above can improve urinary symptoms, and there are also medications available that can help. However, if symptoms don't improve or are severe, then referral to a pelvic floor physiotherapist and/or a doctor who specialises in this area may be needed.

**References:** Australian Menopause Society [menopause.org.au](http://menopause.org.au)  
Jean Hailes for women's health: [jeanhailes.org.au](http://jeanhailes.org.au)  
RACGP. 2017 AFP: Genitourinary Syndrome of Menopause