

FIRST NATIONS WOMEN AND MENOPAUSE

Breaking down barriers.

Menopause is traditionally not a subject discussed among First Nations women, and this might lead to awkwardness when discussing the subject with a health professional. That said, every woman has the right to be informed about what is happening to her body and to have access to resources that may be helpful. Documentation of the experience of menopause in Australian Aboriginal women is scarce, and therefore their menopausal experience is relatively unknown.

In one study of over 200 Indigenous participants, it was found that the average age of onset for menopause was five years less compared with non-Aboriginal Australian women. Furthermore, only 36% of rural Aboriginal women reported symptoms.

Current literature provides evidence for several factors that appear to influence the menopausal experience: the mother's age at menopause, the age at menarche, a high BMI, a lack of physical activity, and smoking. These factors have been associated with an increase in menopausal symptoms and an earlier age of onset. Alternatively, a diet rich in phytoestrogens, high parity with a long duration of breastfeeding, and the use of oral contraceptives have been associated with a lower reporting of menopausal symptoms. The experience of menopause is subjective and can be interpreted in many ways, both socially and culturally. There is no clear consensus on how Aboriginal women view menopause or what influences may play a role in the development of this view. Further uncertainties include whether menopause is seen as a natural transition, whether it is influenced by poor health, what coping mechanisms are used if any, and whether or not this transition is a highly private experience.

In a study seeking to explore how Aboriginal women view menopause, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were undertaken over a year with 25 Aboriginal women.

The major themes that emerged centred around the language used, menopause in the 'stages of life', attitudes towards menopause, symptoms experienced, the role of men, a lack of understanding of menopause, the attribution of menopause to something else, and coping and treatment methods used. 'The Change' or 'Change of Life' was more commonly used than menopause, reflecting a participant's recognition of menopause as a life transition.

Considerable research shows significant variation across cultures in the menopause experience, with biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors associated with attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of menopause in various cultures.