

5 minute guide: Why menopause might be difficult for neurodivergent people

What does research say?

Studies tell us that reproductive and life-stage transitions can be more difficult for autistic people and ADHDers. They seem to be sensitive to monthly hormonal fluctuations as well as to hormonal transitions around puberty, pregnancy and perimenopause.

At these times, features of autism and ADHD can be heightened, with people finding it harder than usual to control their attention, regulate their emotions, and cope with overwhelming sensory sensitivities.

We also know from research that people can find it hard to get the right healthcare during this time, which makes these significant life stages even more traumatic and potentially damaging. When neurodivergent people arrive at menopause they might have had a hard time moving through previous transition points like puberty and pregnancy. Menopause is very unpredictable and largely uncontrollable, and as a key feature of autism is struggling with change and uncertainty, this can also add to the impact.

What can these mean for those going through menopause?

Menopause can also affect several areas of life which are already hard for autistic people and ADHDers, such as memory and attention and extreme emotions. They often already struggle with mental health so can be vulnerable to another hit there, too.

Also, neurodivergent people might enter menopause less well prepared. We know that they often become increasingly isolated with age so might miss out on the social transmission of information about menopause and the support that comes from a friendship group.

There can sometimes also be a struggle to access healthcare, so they might not be getting support from their doctor. Being neurodivergent typically comes alongside complex physical and mental health conditions, and people can often feel invalidated when they try to seek help and so are less likely to do so again.

In addition to all of this, neurodivergent people are more likely to have other marginalised identities, such as being transgender or gender-divergent – and it can be hard to get gender-affirmative healthcare during menopause.

The diagnosis issue

Many people actually don't know about their autism or ADHD when they go through menopause. Both autism and ADHD are historically underdiagnosed in people assigned female at birth due to traditional diagnosis criteria that had been mainly focusing on male autistic traits. In addition, camouflaging (i.e. masking), a characteristic of "hiding" their autistic traits to live within the neurotypical social world, have largely impacted autistic people assigned female at birth to live in the blind spot of autism diagnosis.

Growing up undiagnosed is difficult – you know that you're different and so does everyone else, but no one knows why. Individuals can struggle through school, struggle to get into employment and maintain a job, as well as often having trouble with friendships and relationships.

Sometimes, the turbulence of menopause and the amplification of autistic and ADHD struggles means that undiagnosed people are finally identified as neurodivergent. Understanding this crucial fact about themselves can help them find coping strategies and connect with neurodivergent peers, but this self-realisation often comes with some degree of grief and anger about missed opportunities and hardships that could have been averted. Sadly, post-diagnostic support is very rare, so more needs to be done to support those coming to terms with a late-life diagnosis.