

More than 3,000 women attended the inaugural National Menopause Show in Toronto. Women are increasingly turning to menopause-related businesses to navigate their symptoms.



IT'S 11 A.M. IN BROOKLYN, New York, on a seasonally confused late-October morning. Still-summery air is humid and overripe, as if the climate itself were dysregulated, water-retentive, hormonal—peri-autumnal? I'm at 1 Hotel Brooklyn Bridge for The New Pause, a menopause symposium that's now in its third year, hosted by

The Swell—an online community for the middle-aged. I'm standing because the convention space is so packed that there's nowhere to sit. "It's worth it!" a menopause coach from the Tri-State area says as she stands next to me. The woman tells me her name, but I can't seem to remember it or locate the card she gave me; it's probably perimenopause.

If menopause is the cessation of a woman's menstrual cycle, perimenopause is the three- to sometimes-10-year hormonal circus that precedes it—a symptomatic "zone of chaos" as Texas-based celebrity ob-gyn Dr. Mary Claire Haver has called it. It can involve—among other things—heightened anxiety, irregular periods, labile moods, night sweats, sleep disruptions, brain fog and forgetfulness. I'm 48 and in the zone.



Menopause has gone Hollywood. Actor Naomi Watts, left, and The Swell founder Alisa Volkman, regularly co-host events.

I'm here with my \$424 ticket and more than 400 women d'un certain age dressed in what I can only describe as meno-core—ethically sourced cashmere, designer Caddis readers (the brand Gwyneth Paltrow sported at her viral ski trial) and a profusion of leopard print—today's sartorial antivenom against the invisibility historically associated with female aging. The Rolling Stones' "Start Me Up" blasts, attendees' fists are pumping, and the event's co-hosts—Swell's 50-year-old founder Alisa Volkman and 56-year-old actress Naomi Watts—take to the stage to applause and a sea of hoisted iPhones. Menopause has gone Hollywood, and Watts has emerged as one of its well-hydrated faces. This January, she released her memoir, *Dare I Say It*, which chronicles her early menopause journey, and in 2022, she founded Stripes Beauty, a "pro-aging" wellness line of "scalp to vag" beauty and skincare products. It includes such punny products as Vag of Honor, a vaginal moisturizer, and a hydrating cream called Dew As I Do.

Watts introduces the day's all-star lineup of speakers: a sort of women's health League of Nations, heavy on physician influencers. They're all founding members of the so-called "menoposse," a group of roughly three dozen celebrity doctors who command more than five million Instagram followers. The redoubtable high priestess of the posse is Haver (anointed by the *New York Times* as The Queen of Menopause), who has grown her platform into a multimillion-dollar supplement business called The Pause Life. Haver was scheduled to headline this event but is a no-show. Throughout the day, I hear attendees whisper speculatively about her mysterious absence, although, at least philosophically, hushed tones are not the vibe here. Menopause has entered the chat, grabbed the mic and is living out loud.

The Swell is part of a global shift in how menopause is discussed, understood, collectively metabolized and marketed. Long referred to as The Change, menopause is in the throes of its own full-scale transformation and PR rebrand. Canadian ob-gyn Dr. Jen Gunter, author of *The Menopause Manifesto*,

has partly attributed menopause's pivot to arithmetic: She told *Wired* magazine that 471 million women worldwide were in menopause in 1990, but by this year, that number is projected to be more than 1 billion. "This is not a niche [medical] event," she said. "This is a main event for half the population."

The population inflation dovetails with our increasing lifespan, the pandemic-enabled algorithmic rise of the Instagram celebrity doctor and a cross-generational, morally directed rejection of the mute button. "There's a cohort effect: Prior generations were silent about menopause, but Gen X, who tend to reject things, are like, 'We're not doing this anymore!'" says Dr. Rebecca Thurston, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh who studies menopause and treats menopausal women in her practice. Millennials, who are more open and active online, are even less willing to put up with the silence and shame.

A-listers have taken up the gauntlet, too, turning menopause into a cause

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célèbre. Actor Halle Berry, in a cri de coeur, shouted, “I’m in menopause!” on Capitol Hill last May, helping to pass legislation to fund research and education. Former first lady Michelle Obama spoke candidly on her podcast about a hot flash she had on Marine One, describing it “like somebody put a furnace in my core and turned it on high.” And last September on *The Today Show*, singer Alanis Morissette summed up her current mood as “this beautiful perimenopausal unravelling.”

All of this has delivered me to this overcrowded room in Brooklyn’s Dumbo neighbourhood, where, over the next seven hours, we will be educated on the havoc menopause will wreak on our bodies, bones, skin, hair and brains. And we will be exhorted by panellists to, in no particular order: reclaim our power, let go of lies, take up jumping (box jumping, squat jumping or even jumping jacks will do), lift heavy weights, see aging as a privilege, eat more protein, advocate for ourselves, take what we need (but

with discernment), and feel the “freedom in our pelvis.” I’ll admit that I had expected something more cortisol-soothing and Goop-ian—more flower walls and green juices. Yes, the energy is friendly and confiding, but it’s also rousing, evangelical, thrumming with outrage, equal parts conference and crusade, rally and rave. Except instead of, say, glow sticks or protest placards, guests are aggressively waving fans in time to a Gen X-friendly playlist (OMD, Madonna, George Michael).

At some point in the afternoon, as my energy declines and my attention sags (much like my estrogen levels and my jowls), I take a break. I wander through the Middle Aged Marketplace. There’s a library of menopause literature, featuring the guest speakers’ books (including ob-gyn Dr. Sharon Malone’s *Grown Woman Talk*, Italian neuroscientist Dr. Lisa Mosconi’s *The Menopause Brain* and Dr. Vonda Wright’s *Guide to Thrive*) because menopause is now a genre.

It’s also a movement and a marketing ploy, fecund with financial opportunity. Next to the bookstand and across from Nutrafol, a line of hair-growth supplements (hair thinning and loss is another menopausal symptom some women experience), a woman with her eyes closed sits and vibrates on an electromagnetic-powered chair called the Emsella, designed to incite quick muscle contractions for better-than-kegel pelvic-floor strengthening. Other women mill around dipping their fingers in pots of Jones Road “Miracle Balm,” a moisturizing cream blush that’s packed with jojoba seed oil and designed for dry, mature skin. “What brings you here?” one woman asks a new friend, who gloomily replies, “I make toys, but it’s terrible.” I don’t know if the woman is referring to sex toys or cat toys, but I don’t ask. The toy-maker continues brightly, popping a calcium chew sample from the Seen Nutrition stall: “I’m thinking of getting into the menopause field!” Given the turnout here, it’s a solid plan.



I FIRST HEARD the word menopause from *The Golden Girls*, the OG menoposse. In a 1986 episode, titled “The End of the Curse,” Blanche—presumably in her early 50s—thinks she’s pregnant (her period is nine days late). She visits her doctor for confirmation and returns disconsolate. Rose and Dorothy deduce from the grimness of Blanche’s mood that she must be terminally ill. “I’m not dying, Rose, but I might as well be. It’s menopause,” Blanche announces to a swelling and vaguely tragic soundtrack. “I wish I could die, because as far as I’m concerned, it’s the end of my life!” Her career as a seductress—her life as herself—is over. Blanche slams the door and retreats to her bedroom to suffer alone in silence.

“There are so many things that women are supposed to keep quiet about and just endure. Menopause is part of that continuum,” Thurston tells me, “but it is imbued with an extra layer of shame and silence because it’s gynecologic, it’s associated with aging, it’s not particularly sexy.”

The silence around menopause is both internally and economically motivated, perversely integrated into the Canadian and American medical systems. Women are not encouraged to talk to their doctors because doctors themselves receive little to no education in menopause care. (In fact, a U.S. survey conducted by the Menopause Society found that just one-fifth of ob-gyn residency directors reported that menopause education was part of their training.) “Why aren’t we training the providers? Because menopause is seen as a financial loss leader,” explains Thurston. In all Canadian provinces except for Manitoba, and in the

U.S., family doctors can't bill appropriately for menopause care and therefore aren't motivated to educate themselves or properly treat their patients; the financial model is set up to put both patient and physician on mute.

Toronto-based sleep medicine physician and certified menopause practitioner Dr. Woganee Filate explains that there is no comprehensive fee code for primary care for menopause. "In other words, if you go to your doctor and say, 'I want to talk about menopause,' your doctor can only get paid for a 10-minute increment." This blind spot in women's health care has been called the biggest medical ball drop of the last 100 years.

What may be an epic ball drop and financial loss for the medical system is a windfall for Meno Inc. The menopause market, estimated at US\$16.9 billion globally, bleeds into the beauty and wellness industries, ever-fired by our collective obsession with self-improvement and optimization. Today's menopause economy is flooded with femtech start-ups, menopause coaches, books, naturopaths, supplement companies, conventions, doulas, snacks, influencers, trainers, podcasters, digital health platforms and even menopause entertainment (including the PBS documentary *The M Factor*, comedian Samantha Bee's off-broadway show *How To Survive Menopause* and a new CBC menopause comedy called *Small Achievable Goals* from *Baroness Von Sketch* alumni Meredith MacNeill and Jennifer Whalen).

What has long been a black box to most practitioners now also serves as a welcome mat for new private healthcare clinics. In December 2024, Filate co-founded Lume Women + Health in downtown Toronto. The new clinic "connotes illumination" and that "women have been in the dark," she says. "Especially after we've had our babies, we're forgotten by society and by the medical community. We wanted to turn the light back on."

Lume offers programs in pelvic health, sexual wellness and peri/menopausal care and support (a three-month package is \$895). The latter provides individualized support and education around menopause hormone replacement therapy (MHT). The care is customized because menopause affects women in wildly different ways. For Black and Hispanic women, menopause symptoms, like hot flashes and night sweats, are more severe and can last longer, while Asian women, for example, have fewer hot flashes but suffer more from musculoskeletal pain. "Menopause care shouldn't be tacked on as a 10-minute conversation after a blood pressure or UTI appointment," says Filate. "We want to give doctors and patients the time."

In the new menopause economy, MHT—which is typically a combination of estrogen and synthetic progesterone—is enjoying a dramatic pendulum swing. Once among the most prescribed treatments in North America and widely viewed as a miracle potion, its use sharply dropped after a 2002 study conducted by the U.S.-based Women's Health Initiative determined that MHT increased the risk of breast cancer. Researchers have since established that the study, which caused widespread fear and panic, was extravagantly misleading and, summarily, wrong.

Today, MHT, which can treat hot flashes and bone loss during the menopause transition, is back in vogue, but it remains a highly fraught, inflammatory subject. "There is so much emotion around hormone therapy. But it is a drug like any other drug: there are risks, there are benefits," says Thurston. "We keep layering onto it this expectation that it's going to do all the things: it's going to prevent brain aging, it's going to make your skin look great, it's going to improve your libido. It defies logic."

Thurston believes we need to get away from thinking about MHT as a panacea or a poison. In the New Menopause era, there seems to be a New Shame in not taking it, as if failing to immediately demand a prescription from your physician is also a failure in proactivity and self-advocacy, an anti-feminist sign of self-abandonment. But not everyone even knows to ask for

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MHT, and visiting your doctor about peri/menopausal symptoms can inspire a head-patting dismissal—the suffering not considered significant or life-compromising enough to warrant the Rx pad. (What's more, B.C. is the only province that covers MHT under its drug insurance plan.) The healthcare system, with its educational deficits and history of medical gaslighting, has often left women siloed and suffering. It has also escorted them directly to naturopaths, to "natural remedies,"

to the supplement aisles of Whole Foods, and even—most problematically—to certain medspas where doctors can administer Botox with a side of bio-identical hormones.

This new surfeit of choice and information feels less empowering to me than overwhelming. I wonder whether or not I should go on MHT, or whether I need to start drinking the “Hot Girl Menopause Smoothie” (your basic status-smoothie confection of maca, blueberries, coconut water and vegan protein) that *The M Factor* producer Tamsen Fadal sips cheerfully on her Instagram page. Maybe that will give me the energy to start a strength training regimen before my bones snap like twigs. Perhaps I should order a weighted vest and some dumbbells, except that my house is too small for a home gym, so obviously we’ll need to move. I suggest this to my husband, but then we have an argument, so perhaps I need a new husband. Or maybe I just need to attend a menopause retreat?

Toronto-based virtual personal trainer and menopause coach Samantha Montpetit-Huynh is hosting one called Flip Flops and Hot Flashes in Costa Rica this spring (starting at \$1,800 a person, not including airfare). These tropical hormone holidays invite peri/menopausal travellers to spend a slow, restorative week partaking in gentle yoga, sacral dance, strength training, cold plunging and journaling. “So many women think that this time of our lives means everything is over. No more fun,” says Montpetit-Huynh, “I say fuck that! This is our time!”

After Montpetit-Huynh’s menopause symptoms were dismissed by her doctor, she educated herself, completed menopause courses with a personal trainer, gynecologist and fitness coach, and started coaching



From left: Naomi Watts, Katie Couric, Tamsen Fadal, Alisa Volkman and Natalie Nixon are some of the influential women spearheading the menopause movement.

women on Zoom. For between \$2,000 to \$3,500, Montpetit-Huynh offers fitness, nutrition, lifestyle and emotional counsel, as well as on-demand communication, over the course of 12 weeks. I take the opportunity to ask for her advice: How does a regular person navigate this new world? “It is highly recommended to get a menopause coach!” she says plainly, with a caveat: “There are now a ton of them. A ton. It’s very predatory. Everybody is slapping menopause on their brand, on every product.” (There is no standard certification to become a menopause coach, which further fogs the landscape.)

“As a scientist, steeped in this literature, it’s hard for *me* to navigate my way through this, to sort fact from fiction. There’s no hope for the average individual,” Thurston says. “It’s a buyer-beware situation.” At the very least, it’s wise to avoid magic-bullet products that overpromise with catchphrases such as “balances hormones,” “dissolves belly fat” and “speeds up metabolism.”

“Every time a woman is in a vulnerable state, there is something to sell her,” muses functional medicine practitioner Shalini Bhat, who helms Toronto’s Movement Boutique and treats everything from a patient’s mindset to their microbiome. “There’s business in vulnerability.” This strikes me as correct and deeply depressing. Instead of flying to a Costa Rican beach or hiring a personal hormone concierge, I long to take to my bed like *Blanche*.

This is not to say that I’m recommending a return to suffering in silence or to viewing MHT, for example, as poisonous, or all supplements as snake oil and money-wasting exercises in self-delusion. I’m a fan of knowledge, information and personal choice, and I subscribe (and find hope and comfort) in one of Haver’s taglines: “Menopause is inevitable. Suffering through it is not.”

Women participate in a group exercise at The New Pause Symposium in New York City.



IN HOPES OF finding more clarity, I attend the inaugural National Menopause Show in Toronto, hosted by television personality and host of the podcast *Aging Powerfully* Melissa Grelo. More than 3,000 people attend the day-long event, which features fitness trainers, authors, virtual health-platform reps, matcha companies (“matcha for menopause!”) and so-called hormone-balancing snacks with names like Lady Bits and Bites. I stop at a Jamieson Vitamins stall that features a “Dear Menopausal Me” wall that’s covered with hand-written confessions and imperatives such as “Men are stupid. We aren’t crazy,” and “Don’t worry what others think. Do what is best for you, always. And get the divorce!”

Aeryon Ashlie, the 50-year-old founder of Vancouver-based supplement company Aeryon Wellness, shares her own advice with the motivational let’s-do-this energy of a locker-room coach: “My big message to women in their 40s and 50s is: Have a menopausal plan! Go have a conversation with your doctor! If your doctor gaslights you, go find someone else. This is game time!” A plan can include ways to exercise, sleep well, manage stress and eat more protein and fibre. “You can’t out-supplement, out-MHT a crappy lifestyle,” Ashlie says.

She—like many of her customers—believes in the benefits natural health products provide. While all Canadian supplements are third-party tested by Health Canada, their purported effects are often not scientifically proven. Aeryon Wellness, whose products are available in more than 600 stores across Canada and the U.S., sells a perimenopause supplement called “Reclaim,” and will introduce a new menopause supplement called “No Pause” this fall containing saffron—said to alleviate hot flashes. One satisfied customer states her mother-in-law’s menopause symptoms disappeared completely after one week on Reclaim. “We just ordered two more bottles!”



ONE OF THE upsides to aging, I sometimes think, is that it might be freeing in some ways. “It’s called the Fuck You Fifties,” Jane Fonda has said, reframing midlife as a time when women can finally become not only who they want to be but who they are. A monologue from British comedy drama *Fleabag* flashes

to mind. Belinda tells the younger Fleabag that with menopause comes liberation: “You’re free. No longer a slave, no longer a machine with parts. You’re just a person in business.” Bewildered, Fleabag responds, “I was told [menopause] was horrendous.” Belinda takes a celebratory sip of her martini and says dryly: “It is. But then it’s magnificent.”

The problem, it seems to me, with the commercialization of menopause is that it feels freshly confining—it’s a new prescription. Today, you’re not just a person in business, you’re a business opportunity, a consumer category, someone being aggressively sold a million different products. We’re now being instructed—again—how to eat, how to exercise, how to moisturize, how to optimize our suboptimal bodies, how to remain attractive and relevant, how to go for walks and how to age. I think about the title of Tamsen Fadal’s new book, out this March: *How to Menopause*. Menopause is now a verb. It’s something else we have to perform, master, do.

I feel exhausted. Maybe it’s because my brain, according to Dr. Lisa Mosconi, is not in decline but in the midst of a full system update. In her 2024 book, Mosconi argues that the female brain undergoes three major neurological remodels: during puberty, pregnancy and perimenopause. “While the general mindset in the Western world is that menopause takes things away from us,” she writes, “the untold story is that it’s also busy endowing us with new gifts.” After menopause, Mosconi says, women are capable of greater empathy, emotional mastery, general life satisfaction and what she dubs “self-transcendence.” I want to believe in all of this, in this freeing, empathetic, transcendent magnificence ahead. But I’m not buying it yet. ☹