

**Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on petition [PE2012](#): Remove need for follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH) blood tests before prescribing Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT),  
lodged by Angela Hamilton**

**Brief overview of issues raised by the petition**

The petitioner wants to see a change in how a woman<sup>i</sup> experiencing perimenopausal (pre menopause) symptoms is treated. She argues that currently women are tested for levels of a particular hormone, follicle stimulating hormone (FSH) to ascertain approaching menopause. FSH is the hormone that is active in ovulation.

She argues that the levels of FSH fluctuate during the years leading up to menopause as women continue to ovulate, if more irregularly, and levels of FSH do not necessarily provide an accurate assessment or confirmation/denial of symptoms experienced. She feels that there could be an over-reliance on the test in women aged 40-45 and that they are more likely to be dismissed if levels come back as 'normal'.

She argues that a FSH test is not necessarily relevant when debilitating symptoms associated with menopause and perimenopause are present.

**Menopause, perimenopause and postmenopause**

These are not two distinct stages, but a woman is regarded to be menopausal when her periods have ceased completely. Periods become less regular and less frequent over the years leading up to menopause. Symptoms can be experienced from the start of these changes to beyond the last period, when postmenopausal and include:

- 'brain fog' and memory issues
- difficulty sleeping
- fatigue
- hot flushes
- joint aches
- loss of sex drive (libido)
- low mood or anxiety
- migraine
- night sweats
- vaginal dryness or pain.

[Further information about the symptoms of menopause](#)

According to NHS Inform:

“Perimenopause and menopause are a natural part of a woman’s life course and usually occur between the ages 45 and 55 years of age, as a woman’s oestrogen levels drop ([although it can start earlier](#)). In the UK, the average age for a woman to reach menopause is 51... [Postmenopause](#) is the time after a woman experiences her last period. A woman is said to be postmenopausal when she has not had a period for 12 months.

Menopause happens when the ovaries stop producing as much of the hormone oestrogen and no longer release an egg each month. Menopause can also occur when a woman’s ovaries are affected by certain treatments such as chemotherapy or radiotherapy, or when the ovaries are removed, often at the time of a hysterectomy.”

## **Follicle Stimulating Hormone and FSH testing**

Confirmation of perimenopause is most often based on the range of symptoms a woman is experiencing, but can be confirmed and potential illness ruled out by a blood test.

[Follicle stimulating hormone \(or FSH\)](#) is one of the [gonadotrophic](#) hormones; the other being luteinising hormone (or LH). Both are released by the pituitary gland into the bloodstream. Follicle stimulating hormone is one of the hormones essential to pubertal development and the function of women’s ovaries and men’s testes.

As a woman approaches menopause, levels of FSH rise.

FSH testing is carried out in the diagnosis of a number of conditions such as pituitary gland disorders, ovarian failure and fertility issues. It can also be used when someone is experiencing symptoms associated with menopause. It is a simple blood test, with blood taken from a vein in the arm. More information about the test is available from [Lab tests online](#).

There is a range of guidance used in Scotland for FSH testing in primary care. [NHS Fife, Area Drug and Therapeutic Committee guidance](#) states:

“Do not routinely measure FSH or LH in perimenopausal women, as levels fluctuate. Test result may be normal in women with vasomotor symptoms and raised levels do not indicate that contraception is no longer required in this group.

- FSH levels may be useful in diagnosing the menopause in patients under 45 years with atypical symptoms, amenorrhoea on progestogen-only contraception or history of hysterectomy with conservation of the ovaries.
- If FSH, LH or oestradiol levels are measured blood should be taken on two occasions 6 to 8 weeks apart. If the woman is not amenorrhoeic the first sample should ideally be taken in the first 5 days of the cycle.”

Similarly, University Hospital of Wishaw, Lanarkshire guidance states:

- “Symptomatic women with cycle irregularity can be clinically diagnosed as entering the menopausal transition. Hypothyroidism or depression may occur in concert during the menopausal transition and should be excluded.
- Testing for a raised serum FSH/LH is not recommended above 45 years of age as the levels are fluctuating and not diagnostic.
- For women <45, two levels of serum FSH are obtained 6-8 weeks apart. If the woman is still menstruating, then the first FSH value should be obtained day 1-5 of the menstrual cycle.”

[NICE \(National Institute for Health and Care Excellence\) guidance provides different advice for women aged 40 – 45 and women over 45](#), with FSH testing suggested for women between 40 and 45, but not for women over 45. While the ages might appear arbitrary, [NICE publishes its consideration of available evidence for all of its recommendations, including in relation to age, in the full guideline](#).

The guidance suggests that clinical assessment and treatment is based on symptoms experienced, which can be made more complex if hormone contraception is being taken.

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The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at [spice@parliament.scot](mailto:spice@parliament.scot)

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<sup>i</sup> menopause will also occur in some transgender men, some intersex individuals and some people with variation in some sex characteristics. Because menopause primarily affects those born as female, the terms 'woman/women' is used in this briefing.