



A Tale of Two Tinas

Two women's experience of healthcare treatment
for perimenopause and menopause

On World Menopause Day 2021 we wanted to highlight the differences in treatment from health care services in Northumberland that two women have experienced as they go through the menopause.

Tina L's story

"In 2016 I visited my GP to ask for Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) to treat my menopause symptoms. I was told only of the risks (mainly breast cancer) and asked to go away and think about it. I was also told I was too young - I was 50 and had not had a period for several months.

I came back and again said that I wanted to go on HRT and this time, was put on a combination HRT (though I can't remember the brand). I was told that I could only have HRT for five years and I would have to go through the menopause at some stage. My hot flushes and night sweats improved but I still had low mood, low self-worth, lack of energy and the most horrendous periods.

I kept going back to my GP to ask for a change in HRT and asked to be prescribed testosterone. My GP asked me what appeared to be very caring questions but then offered me anti-depressants which I refused - I knew I was not depressed - I was simply lacking hormones. It was an emphatic 'no' to testosterone.

I went to see another doctor hoping for a second opinion but surprisingly, I was asked the same questions (with exactly the same wording) and was then again told that I needed anti-depressants. I later found out that these questions are actually set out by the drug manufacturer.

I was left feeling like I was going mad and with little energy or confidence to seek help. I could see my business, that I had worked so hard on, disappearing, meaning I would lose my income and my home. I visited again, only to be offered anti-depressants yet again and was given a card for a private counsellor.

After more visits I was sent to Ashington hospital to see a menopause specialist. I was asked the same questions yet again and told off for having my urine sample supplied in a bottle from home. There was no interest in my real problem, and I sat in my car and cried; I was angry, humiliated and didn't know where to turn.

I had a meeting with a client - someone I hardly knew. She told me how her experience had been the same as mine and she had had to insist on changing HRT. I did my homework on the type of HRT I wanted, and this time was given Tibolone. Within ten days my life was back. I had so much energy! I felt like I could do back flips down the village green. My mood was great. I have not had one Urinary Tract Infection (UTI) since taking HRT.

In the years leading to menopause, I regularly had frightening episodes including a few incidents where I found a lump in my breast leading to hospital visits and mammograms which took up a lot of a consultant's time.

Thankfully on all occasions it was just a cyst, though this meant I had to be treated with very harmful antibiotics (I'm allergic to penicillin) and endured more hospital visits. I haven't had one such incident since being on HRT. Also, within nine months I had lost 22lbs and feel healthier than ever.

Early this year Tibolone started to stop working, gradually at first. By April I again had hot flushes and panic attacks followed by mood changes and memory loss. I contacted a private GP but they needed my blood pressure to be checked. I therefore I contacted the surgery through the online booking service. I was horrified that things had not moved on at all and the practice was still not up to date with HRT risks.

As soon as I entered that I was wanting HRT (using the online service), it immediately asked if I was aware of the breast cancer risk. Again, this is based on outdated science.

I spoke to the doctor and asked to change to a transdermal oestrogen-only patch and micronized progesterone along with testosterone. The doctor warned me that that my periods would return if I opted for this type of HRT. I knew in the back of my mind that this was not correct but could not recall the information at the time.

She told me that she was not confident in prescribing testosterone and would refer me to a Menopause Clinic (I'm still waiting for an appointment).

When I collected my prescription, I was confused by the dose of progesterone which said 'take two tabs on days 15-26 of each 28-day cycle'. I contacted the pharmacy who couldn't understand it either as I'm a woman who has not had a period for five years.

I contacted the surgery and was told that someone would get back. Eventually I found the answer online: women not having periods had one tablet each day and don't have periods returning.

In July I still had symptoms and asked to have Oestrogel to use alongside my patches. I knew I could slowly increase my Oestradiol until my symptoms went. However, my doctor told me that I was already having two products and would have to wait until my Menopause Clinic appointment.

There was no way that I could go back to the dreadful situation that I had been in previously, so I had to insist that it was my right to get the right amount of treatment for my personal symptoms. The doctor only agreed once she had pointed out that I was increasing my breast cancer risk!

I'm still waiting for my appointment at the Menopause Clinic but at least I should have my Oestradiol levels right by then. I feel that I have had to do my doctor's job for them sometimes; finding and researching up to date information while they refer to guidelines issued many years ago based on outdated science.

I dread to think how my life would be now if I had simply agreed to take the recommended anti-depressants and yet this is exactly what is happening to so many women all over the country.

I'm really very keen that women should be able to access the best information and help, hence my support for The Menopause Charities training program for health professionals."

Tina R's story

"I'd telephoned my GP practice in May 2021 as I had been experiencing a number of symptoms for quite some time, that were impacting on my day-to-day life. To be honest, I wasn't sure what to make of them, but I've always found the practice to be really approachable so I knew I could ask any question about my health without feeling silly.

I explained that over the past month I had been feeling increasingly tired, my periods had changed significantly, and I had some hair loss. I also shared that I felt like I was burning from the inside out during the night and had to wander to find cold spots in the house just to cool the furnace I felt was brewing inside. I knew my mum had gone through early menopause, so I did have some awareness, but to be honest as a woman in her early 40s, I didn't think it would be me.

The first thing to highlight that really helped was that my GP really listened. I didn't feel rushed, and it was a very considerate conversation. I'd been feeling quite emotional, and this made all the difference. My GP explained that it could perhaps be perimenopause and suggested we did a round of blood tests to rule anything else out first (for example irregularities in thyroid function).



The thoroughness made me feel really reassured that everything would be covered and that I was in 'a safe pair of hands'. When everything came back clear, I had a blood test to check for indicators of perimenopause.

My GP also explained that even if the test came back without those indicators, I still might be in perimenopause as it's sometimes not clear from the test. I shared at this appointment that my joints had started to develop a dull ache and my moods had changed quite a lot. I would go from crying over the adverts on the TV to experiencing rage over the tiniest of things. My GP was so supportive, and this made me feel like I wasn't going it alone.

Before I got the confirmation of my perimenopause, my GP explored options with me, so I had time to think and decide what was best for me. I was offered the Mirena Coil which has a localised hormone along with an oestrogen cream, and also the option of HRT.

We talked through lifestyle issues such as sleep, what I was eating, alcohol, exercise etc. I honestly can't tell you what a difference this made. I was so well taken care of and it allowed me to make an informed choice, along with some lifestyle changes.

I opted for the Mirena Coil and it has helped quite a bit. I still have symptoms but not as impactful on my life. I know that HRT is an option in the future, if need be, and I would be happy making that choice based on the information I was given.

When my symptoms (that have reduced significantly) happen now, I know what the cause is and give myself a bit more TLC to make sure I'm looking after myself. It's helped a lot in my household too. My partner and child know that if I'm tired or having a spell of brain fog, that it's likely to be linked to perimenopause. It's helped to just normalize it all and has increased their understanding too.

I can honestly say my GP practice has been great. I have received the best possible care. The receptionist was always friendly, I saw two different GPs both of whom were excellent, and the practice nurse who did my blood tests/coil consultation was super friendly and approachable.

Everyone working so hard, all doing their own assessments, tests and building a picture to support my health, and despite their busyness I always felt so warmly welcomed and listened to.

Because I've had such a great standard of care, it doesn't feel like such a worry or a big deal that I'm in perimenopause now. In fact, it's quite the opposite and I can just get on with my life and enjoy it.

I also have to say that a lot of my appointments took place during the pandemic and they were carried out in such a superb way – I always felt safe. I couldn't be more thankful for having such great healthcare."

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Given that almost half the population of Northumberland are going to go through the menopause at some stage in their lives we would hope that Tina R's story would be the most common experience.

Why don't you tell us your story - you can get in touch with us via any of the ways below.

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