

LINDA BARKER:

Going into my menopause was like a slap in the face

Shocked at how the menopause changed her life, interior designer and Changing Rooms presenter Linda Barker, 52, says she was determined to emerge stronger. Linda, who is married to fellow interior designer Chris, 52, and is mum to Jess, 21, is now urging women to talk openly about their experiences to end the stigma around "the change".

“ I was 48 when it suddenly hit without warning. But I knew exactly what it was. I remembered my eldest sister, Jane, arriving for dinner a few years before and having to sit down and fan herself because she was overheating so alarmingly. When she explained she was going through “the change” I was shocked at how it made women suffer so visibly.

And now it was my turn. First, I just felt out of sorts, but the night sweats quickly followed. Well, they call them night sweats, but I’d get them four or five times a day, too – only a few minutes each, yet it was long enough for the perspiration to run down my back. I knew they were coming because a hot flush would start to spread from so deep within it felt as though my blood was boiling.

As the sweat evaporated, a sense of anxiety would overtake me. My heart would race as I’d start worrying, creating problems where there were none. It was as if the menopause magnified everything.

In fact, I’d previously felt only positivity and

excitement at this new chapter in all our lives. After 23 years together I was still very happily married to Chris, who runs our interior design company, and we were

about to move house where I was looking forward to having more time for myself as Jess started university.

Instead, I was becoming more emotional, forgetful, fuzzy-headed and tired from waking up soaked with sweat.

I was lucky to be working in television where we’re quite well looked after. But if I was in a traditional job it would have been hideous. I’m appalled that other women don’t get support through what is a completely natural stage in life – the end of a biological cycle without which there wouldn’t be any children – and which, according to the National Union of Teachers, is forcing out some of its most experienced women members.

Why are women judged so critically, as if we have any choice in the process?

I think it’s our duty as women to remove the stigma that allows this to happen by talking openly about the menopause.

Mine lasted only two years and was a real shocker, what felt like an act of cruelty on behalf of nature that starts with periods followed, for many, by pregnancy, child-birth and child rearing. Then, just as we get the children off our hands, whack, the menopause hits like a slap in the face.

For me, it was a real wake-up call. My mum died of heart disease 10 years ago when she was 76 and my dad, 88, is really poorly in a care home. He needs 24-hour help and can’t cook for himself or even put the kettle on.



So the menopause made me take stock. I realised that, bloomin' 'eck, I'm on the way down through life, not on the way up any more.

I needed to work harder just to stand still physically, never mind improve. I

decided to take control of my health at least. I was already seeing a personal trainer, but I started focusing more on load-bearing exercise, lifting weights to strengthen my bones because Mum developed osteoporosis before she died.

Oestrogen, the "female hormone", is key to protecting bones but it starts to decrease as we approach 50. That causes the ovaries to stop producing eggs,

heralding the menopause. Fluctuating levels are responsible for the hot flushes.

Not only did I become physically and mentally stronger than I'd ever been, I grew fit enough to run the London Marathon for the first time in 2012.

I felt I was regaining control and all without popping pills. I tried HRT for a short while until my GP pointed out that by rebooting your hormone levels it doesn't stop, but just postpones, the menopause. As some health risks, such as breast cancer, increase the longer you're on HRT, it's recommended you don't stay on it longer than 10 years – and I didn't fancy going through all this pushing 60.

So I took up yoga, started eating more purely – I even got into raw foods – and took black cohosh, a herbal remedy used for temporary relief from menopause symptoms, although it's not suitable for everyone, so check the packaging.

I've also started taking a vitamin drink called Revive Active which is specifically targeted at helping improve mental clarity. Cutting down on alcohol seemed to make a difference, too. As a result, I've got more energy than ever and that is directly down to my age because it has made me aware I have to make an effort, at a stage in life where I've finally got more time to do just that.

I want to feel attractive and glamorous, too. I've developed more lines and wrinkles, which I don't mind, but the only moisturiser I could find that had the courage to declare itself specifically aimed at women going through the menopause was **Stratum C**, which claims to stimulate the production of collagen, which helps keep skin firm and supple but is also affected by falling

oestrogen levels.

I'm not trying to look younger, just the best for my age, and the serum and cream have been amazing for my skin.

So is being determined to remain positive. And I am positive. I feel strong, I approach life differently, more appreciatively. I'm in control and at a stage where I don't put up with any rubbish.

I'm still ambitious but a lot more relaxed about my career. I have a new show called A New House For £5,000 starting in the summer on Channel 5. I'm in a very happy partnership and my relationship with my daughter is great. Life is sorted in many ways.

That's why I've decided not to call them hot flushes any more. I prefer to think of them as power surges.

AS TOLD TO JOANI WALSH

■ Linda is the face of **Stratum C** skincare. Visit stratumc.com (tel 01252 267950).



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DEBUT On Changing Rooms in 2000

GETTING THROUGH THE MENOPAUSE

Melanie Tipples, consultant gynaecologist at Nuffield Health Chichester Hospital, says:

"Cutting down on alcohol and coffee and taking up aerobic exercise can help get through the menopause. Eating foods containing soya and phytoestrogens (whole grains, dried beans) or taking herbal remedies, such as red clover, may also help.

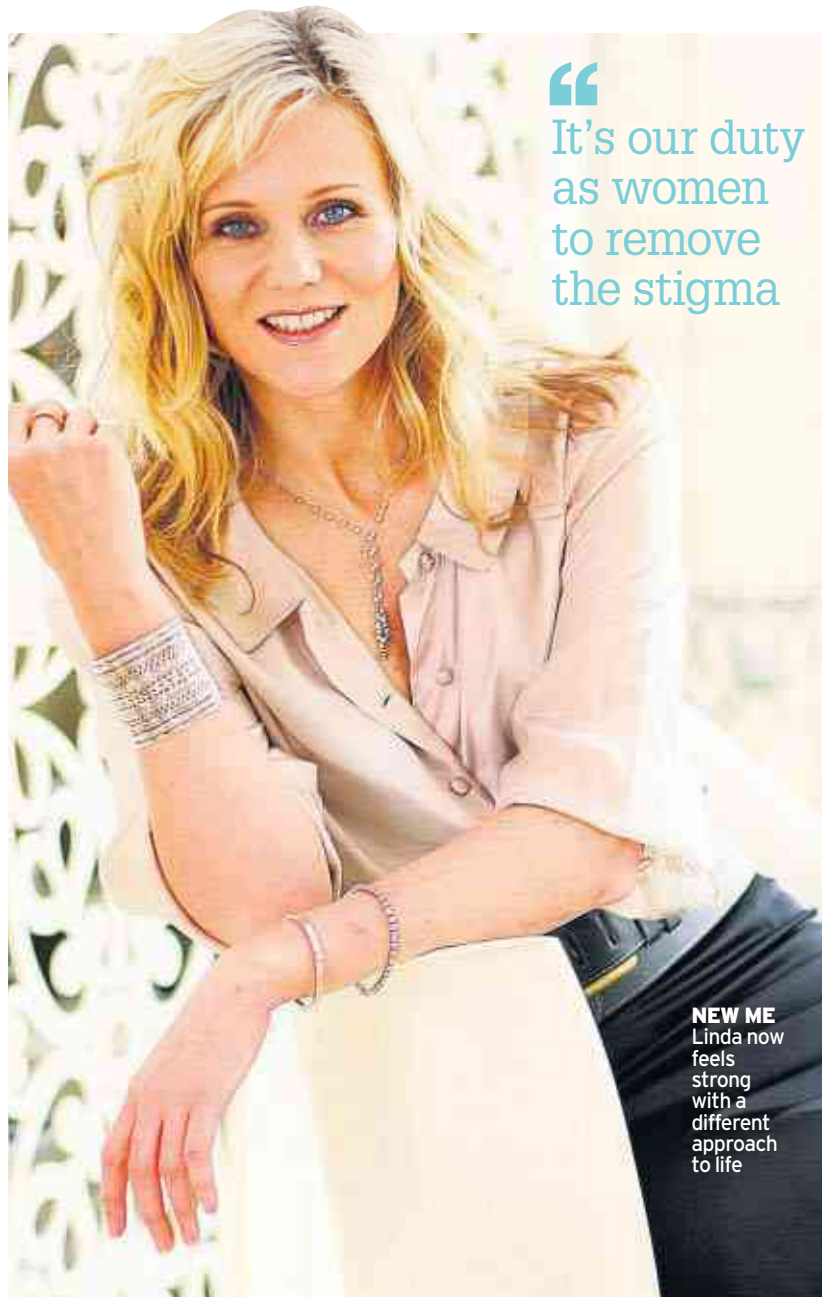
"Women who still find symptoms intolerable may be suitable for a replacement version of the hormone oestrogen (it's generally combined with another hormone, progesterone).

"As well as improving symptoms, there are health benefits – HRT

reduces risk of osteoporosis. But the longer you take it, the greater other health risks increase – for breast cancer, heart attack and stroke, for instance. And if you've already suffered from, or are at increased risk of, hormone-sensitive cancers, such as breast cancer, any form of oestrogen, including phytoestrogens, may not be appropriate.

"So, you really do need to weigh up the pros and cons with your GP and consider also that whenever you do stop taking HRT, the drop in oestrogen will cause symptoms once more. Will you be better able to cope a few years down the line than now?"

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