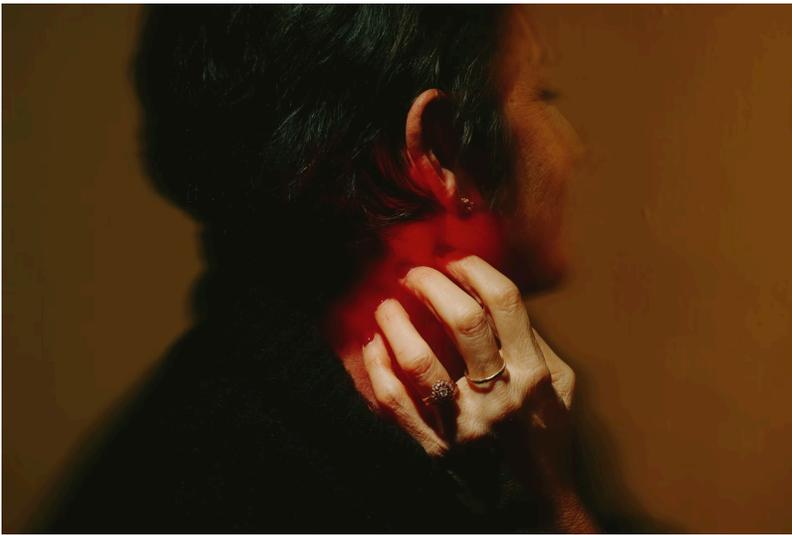


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HEALTH | WELLNESS

My Doctors Blamed My Itch on Perimenopause. It Was Cancer.

Two years, 11 doctors and one diagnosis later, I've learned a lot about how medicine can miss women's symptoms



'My doctors had been so focused on the most likely answer, that they failed to dig deep enough to find the actual problem,' writes Jessica Toonkel. ELIZABETH COETZEE/WSJ

By [Jessica Toonkel](#) [Follow](#)

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The itch crept up my back, across my stomach and along my arms and legs. It flared during my morning runs and followed me to the office. It was particularly acute at night.

I was covered in marks from unconscious bouts of scratching during the few short bursts of sleep I could steal. I looked and felt like a mauled animal.

My doctor shrugged and said it was just what happened to middle-aged women. During perimenopause—the period of time that can last years, before a woman's menstrual cycle ends—dropping estrogen levels can thin and dry skin, he said, and suggested that I put lotion on before bed.

Another doctor, who ruled out allergies, also said it must be perimenopause. She put me on a birth control pill. The itch continued. An “intuitive wellness practitioner” who said she was trained in nutrition, botanical medicine and homeopathy, promised to get to the root cause of my itching. She didn’t. A functional health doctor prescribed progesterone cream to help balance my hormones, another solution tailored to women experiencing menopause.

Two years and 11 doctors later, I learned that my stubborn itch had nothing to do with menopause, perimenopause or hormones. I had cancer.

I was diagnosed with Stage 2 Hodgkin’s Lymphoma, a blood cancer for which a common symptom is a persistent itch. My doctors had been so focused on the most likely answer, that they failed to dig deep enough to find the actual problem. And I didn’t know how to ask them to probe further.



‘I had a rich social life and a family I wanted to spend time with,’ Toonkel writes. ‘But I felt myself withdrawing from it all, even my kids.’ ELIZABETH COETZEE/WSJ

For decades, the medical community viewed women as small men, which meant doctors didn’t even acknowledge that we may exhibit distinctive symptoms of diseases, let alone consider how hormone levels play into our overall health. Middle-aged women who were suffering from depression were often prescribed anti-depressants or anti-anxiety medicine without further discussion or exploration, said Dr. Anna Barbieri, an obstetrician gynecologist and certified menopause practitioner in New York City.

The law didn't mandate that women be included in medical clinical research until 1993. But the medical community's growing awareness of the implications of hormone fluctuations on women's health has in some cases, mine included, created a new danger that doctors write off symptoms as hormonal when they could indicate more serious problems.

Menopause is having a moment. The oldest millennials—the nation's biggest generation—are entering their mid-40s and devouring a torrent of new supplements, lotions, pills, gels, books and podcasts devoted to menopause relief. Women in the U.S. spend about \$13 billion a year to treat their menopause symptoms, according to a 2024 survey by AARP.

“We are witnessing a massive pendulum swing of one type of ignorance to another,” Barbieri said. “I think we are way oversimplifying health here and worry that some women will not get treated for major conditions.”

Desperate for Answers

In the two years I battled the itch, it blossomed from a nuisance to a constant presence in my life. I was willing to try anything to stop it. I tried two different biologic drugs, shots that required me to see an allergist every few weeks. On a work trip to France, a colleague brought me to a store to buy her favorite skin creams.



‘I was covered in marks from unconscious bouts of scratching during the few short bursts of sleep I could steal,’ she writes. ELIZABETH COETZEE/WSJ

I went on a wellness kick: I stopped eating gluten and dairy and forced down celery juice every morning. I tried supplements, suggested by the functional health doctor, including ones labeled “hormonal detox,” and the progesterone cream, one of the hormones that declines in women in middle age. Nothing worked.

In the middle of covering Paramount’s high-stakes merger with Skydance, I found myself rolling up my sleeves to itch my arm while talking to sources and my editors. Exhausted by the end of the day, I began turning down evening invitations from friends and colleagues.

I quit my weekly after-work tennis game and stopped my workout classes because sweating made it worse. I began missing out on Friday night family movie nights because I couldn’t stay awake after long weeks without sleep. One night, my then 9-year-old son came in to tuck me in. “Feel better mamma,” he said.

I’m a journalist who spends every day on the phone and in meetings. I had a rich social life and a family I wanted to spend time with. But I felt myself withdrawing from it all, even my kids.

I, too, assumed that whatever was causing my mysterious symptoms had to be perimenopause. Celebrities like Naomi Watts and Halle Berry routinely popped up on my Instagram feed to tell me what symptoms I should look out for. Gwyneth Paltrow suggested creams that might help me feel better.

I spent thousands of dollars in search of a solution.



Jessica Toonkel works while receiving a round of chemotherapy in June 2025. JESSICA TOONKEL

‘You Don’t Look Like You’re in Distress’

I was so willing to believe it was hormonal that when I started having a new weird pain while drinking a glass of wine or a cocktail, I believed the gastroenterologist who told me it was acid reflux likely caused by hormonal shifts. I loaded up on Tums when going out for work drinks, but eventually quit drinking altogether.

Then, last spring, a new symptom emerged. I started having a stabbing pain in my chest during morning runs, and struggled to breathe deeply. I thought it was an injury from Pilates, but, after a couple of weeks of the pain, I went to see the nurse practitioner on call at my doctor's office.

She sent me to the emergency room for a CT scan of my chest to make sure it wasn't serious, a decision that finally brought some answers.

"You don't look like you are in distress," she said. "But let's make sure."

I called my husband and told him it was probably a huge overreaction, but that he should meet me at our local ER in Brooklyn just in case.

I will never forget the look on the young ER doctor's face when he came to share the CT scan results. There was a 10-centimeter mass in my right lung and fluid building up inside my lungs.

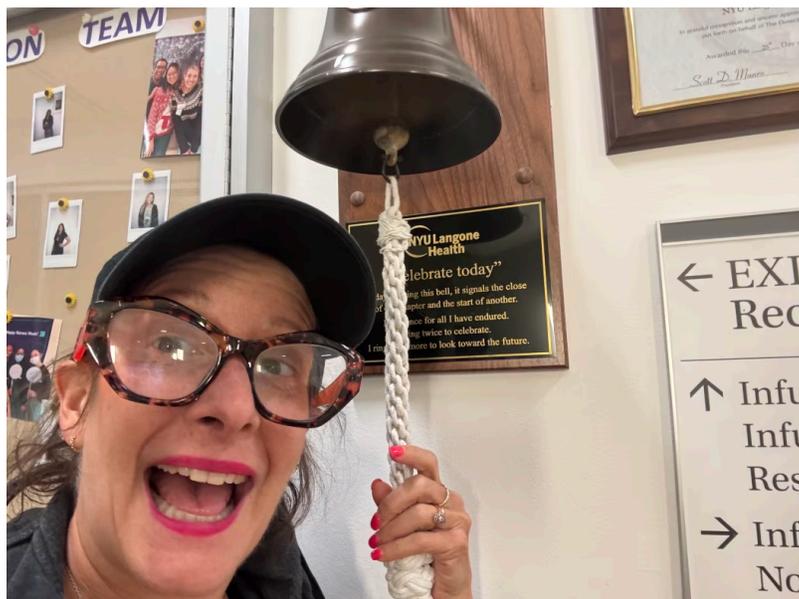
"Does that mean it's cancer?" I asked. He mumbled something about more tests being needed and quickly left the room. My husband and I held each other and cried.

Hours later, I was sent by ambulance to NYU Langone Hospital. Doctors asked where I was during September 11 (living abroad), if I smoked (not since college), and if I handled any biohazardous materials at my job (only tips and Google docs). Doctors drained a liter of fluid from my lungs.

I spent the next several days trotting to back-to-back appointments for procedures and tests, including a breathing test, a PET scan and a lung biopsy. The pulmonologist suggested I make an appointment with NYU's oncologist that specialized in lung cancer. I remember thinking to myself that my kids—only 17 and 11—were not ready to lose their mom. When we got the diagnosis of Stage 2 Hodgkin's Lymphoma, a curable form of blood cancer, my first words in response were, "I am thrilled."

Later that night, I asked ChatGPT about the disease and saw the first two symptoms listed were severe itching and pain when drinking alcohol, which Dr. John Leonard, director of the Center for Blood Cancers at NYU Grossman School of Medicine, later confirmed can be symptoms. (The most common symptom, however, is enlarged lymph nodes, he said.)

Blood cancers like Hodgkin's Lymphoma can initially get overlooked because night sweats, another of the most common symptoms, are also a symptom of menopause or perimenopause, said Dr. Kelsey Martin, clinical director for the division of classical hematology at the Yale Cancer Center.



Toonkel rings the bell after completing chemotherapy in September 2025. JESSICA TOONKEL

More patients are bringing up perimenopause and menopause, which Martin sees as a positive. "However, I do think women's symptoms can easily get dismissed if doctors don't do their due diligence," she said. "It's important that there is this recognition of the implications of hormones but we are reaching for these simple labels to explain these complicated things."

It's not just blood cancers like mine that can be missed or misdiagnosed by doctors. Barbieri said brain fog, another menopause symptom, can also be a sign of early onset dementia, although that is rare. One of her patients who had frequent urination and had been treated for urinary tract infections, later learned that she had ovarian cancer, which can also cause similar symptoms.

That is not to say that every time a woman is peeing more frequently, she should think she has ovarian cancer, Barbieri warned. It's about having "a more thoughtful medical approach that questions the most common or easiest diagnosis when symptoms are persistent."

Likewise, not every itch is going to be a cancer diagnosis.

"I think the takeaway is if you don't get a satisfactory answer and it is something that has lasted for a long time, keep pushing," Dr. Leonard said.

I completed six months of chemotherapy in September and am now in remission. My mysterious symptoms went away after two infusions as my oncologist said they would. I am lucky that I had a

type of cancer that was highly treatable. Not all women are so lucky.

Women—myself included—too often worry about coming off as hypochondriacs about pain or symptoms, so we just bear it without pressing for answers when our gut tells us the doctors are wrong. I had so many blood tests and procedures but I never pushed for a CT scan. If I had, we could have caught this sooner.

“If you aren’t feeling well, you need to continue to look for a doctor that will listen to you,” said Dr. Caroline Fierro, a New York-based gynecologist who specializes in functional and hormonal health.

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[Jessica Toonkel](#) covers the biggest corporate developments in media, entertainment and tech. She joined The Wall Street Journal from the Information, where she broke many stories, including Amazon’s acquisition of MGM and the New York Times’ buyout of the Athletic as well as Disney’s plans for an ad-supported streaming service...

