

# Why You Should Exercise During Menopause

**Y**ou've probably heard this before: Working out, exercising regularly and being physically active has huge benefits for both your mental and physical health. This can be especially important for women going through the menopause. Your body is experiencing a number of changes that may be uncomfortable, stressful and even painful. Menopause is an important transition in women's lives. Use it as a reminder to take good care of yourself.

Menopause is associated with a natural decline in oestrogen, which increases visceral fat mass, decreases bone density, decreases muscle mass and decreases strength. Exercise can help you through this phase of life and leave you feeling better than ever. Whether you're already an aspiring runner, yogi, or salsa dancer (or anything in between) or a 'reluctant exerciser', regular physical activity is crucial when facing the menopause.

## 5 MAJOR PERKS OF EXERCISE FOR MENOPAUSAL WOMEN

### 1 Heart Health

Before the menopause, females are somewhat protected against the development of cardiovascular disease (CVD) compared to males, and this is thought to be mainly (but not solely) due to oestrogen. The possible beneficial effects of oestrogen on the cardiovascular system include:

- Increasing HDL cholesterol (the good kind)
- Decreasing LDL cholesterol (the bad kind)
- Relaxing, smoothing and dilating blood vessels so blood flow increases
- Soaking up free radicals, naturally occurring particles in the blood that

can damage the arteries, cells and other tissues.

Oestrogen probably affects the cardiovascular system in other ways that are as yet not fully understood. The risk of heart disease increases during and following the menopause. The drop in oestrogen levels can result in:

- An increase in bad cholesterol and a decrease in good cholesterol levels
- Changes in the lipids (fats) in the blood can contribute to the development of atherosclerosis
- Changes in the walls of the blood vessels, making it more likely for plaque and blood clots to form
- An increase in fibrinogen (a substance in the blood that helps the blood to clot), increased levels of blood fibrinogen are related to heart disease and stroke.

This means menopause could arguably be one of the most important periods to stay fit and in shape. The best gift you can give your heart is regular physical activity. Exercise will potentially benefit your heart by:

- Reducing blood pressure and lowering your heart rate
- Helping you lose weight or maintain a healthy weight
- Raising HDL (good) cholesterol levels
- Regulating and control blood sugars which can protect against development of diabetes. Regular aerobic exercise such as cycling, brisk walking, or swimming can reduce the risk of developing diabetes by over 50% by allowing the muscles to better process glycogen, a fuel for energy, which when impaired, leads to excessive blood sugars, and thus diabetes
- Strengthening muscles – this improves the muscles' ability to draw oxygen from the circulating blood, which in

turn reduces the need for the heart (a muscular organ itself) to work harder to pump more blood to the body

- Reducing stress – exercise stimulates the release of endorphins (happy hormones) and reduces cortisol levels (a stress hormone). Stress is a major contributor to the development of cardiovascular disease
- Reducing chronic inflammation within the body – inflammatory responses in the body can contribute to developing diseases.

### 2 Bone Health

Bone is a complex tissue, consisting of a matrix of proteins and minerals that give it the flexibility and strength to support your body and movement. Over a person's lifetime, many factors can affect how healthy bone structure is maintained. One of these factors is the female sex hormone oestrogen. Oestrogen plays an important role in maintaining a functional bone matrix, for example it promotes the activity of osteoblasts, which are cells that produce new bone.

Oestrogen deficiency can lead to excessive bone resorption accompanied by inadequate bone formation. When oestrogen levels drop during the menopause, the osteoblasts aren't able to effectively produce or replace bone. The oestrogen deficiency also increases the number of osteoclasts (cells that break down and absorb bone tissue), resulting in a relative bone loss. Fracture risk is inversely proportional to oestrogen level in postmenopausal women – meaning as oestrogen levels go down so your risk of fracture goes up. Women who have reached menopause are at a greater risk of developing osteoporosis, which can lead to bone fractures and long-term impairment of mobility and

loss of independence.

Working out can help counter some of this bone loss. Weight-bearing and muscle-strengthening exercises are shown to stimulate bone cells which can help maintain and improve bone density.



### Weight Management

By your late 20s you may have realised the rapid metabolism of your youth has started to slow down, and you have to cut back on the volume or type of food you consume. Hormone changes during the menopause can sometimes mean it's easier to gain weight. The menopause affects weight gain in two ways:

i. **Reduces lean muscle mass.** At any given weight, the more muscle on your body, and the less fat, the higher your metabolic rate (metabolic rate is the number of calories burned to keep your body functioning whilst at rest). Building more muscle mass is one thing that can increase a person's metabolic rate. Estimates suggest that every pound of muscle burns three times more calories than every pound of fat in your body.

Declining oestrogen levels are associated with accelerated sarcopenia – a decline in skeletal muscle mass and function (strength), which is one of the main contributors to morbidity, frailty and physical disability. This in turn, however, also impacts weight gain by having 'relatively' less muscle mass and greater fat mass.

ii. **Increases visceral fat.** Oestrogen plays a role in regulating glucose (sugar and carbohydrate) and fat metabolism and therefore body weight. A drop in oestrogen levels may cause the body to use starches and blood sugar less effectively, which would increase fat storage and make it harder to lose weight. The decrease in oestrogen in menopausal women is associated with the loss of subcutaneous (below the skin) fat and an increase in abdominal fat.

After the menopause, women tend to gain weight around their mid-section. This type of fat gain tends to build up in the abdomen and around the organs, which is known as visceral fat. Visceral fat

is linked to many health problems that are potentially dangerous, such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol and even an increased risk of premature death (regardless of your overall weight).

As well as changing oestrogen levels, older women may tend to be less active which means that they burn fewer calories on a daily basis. These factors can all increase a woman's risk for weight gain during the transition through menopause.

When maintaining or losing weight, more physical activity increases the number of calories your body uses for energy or 'burns off'. The burning of calories through physical activity, combined with reducing the number of calories you eat, creates a 'calorie deficit' that results in weight loss. Exercise alone won't keep the weight off, watching what types of food you eat and having a balanced diet, possibly smaller portion size will all contribute to keeping you healthy as you transition through the menopause.



### Symptom Relief

Research has shown that women who lived sedentary lives had more severe menopause symptoms than active women. Anecdotally, exercise has been shown to relieve hot flushes! In addition to this regular physical activity could even help prevent symptoms.



### Boost Self-Esteem

Every woman will experience the menopause differently. Some will barely notice the change whereas others will battle with more severe symptoms, often not feeling their best during this time. This transition and the symptoms it brings with it can place strain on relationships with family and friends and even within the work place. You may be feeling quite blue at times. Exercise can be an amazing way to relieve stress and is known to boost mental health in people suffering from anxiety and depression. Research has shown that over time, physical activity is associated with higher levels of self-worth and menopause-related quality of life.

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