Menopause and Joint Pain

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The Connection Between Menopause and Joint Pain

Menopause brings a wide variety of discomforts, and although each woman will experience a unique set of symptoms, some are more common than others. Hot flashes, sleep disturbances, and mood swings are almost universal, but so are aches and pains, which can be overlooked.

A large number of women complain about joint pain and body aches from perimenopause onwards; 57% of women who have entered menopause describe that pain as significant. Instead of allowing that pain to dictate your daily life, learn where it comes from and how to control it before it forces you to give up the activities you love.

Causes of Joint Pain

Joint pain may be traced to arthritis, the inflammation of the joints. Arthritis affects one in five American adults, and the risk for most types of arthritis increases as you age. However, joint pain during menopause is not necessarily the sudden onset of a chronic arthritic condition, but often a combination of certain processes and reactions, including:

- **Drop in estrogen –** Dramatic chemical changes begin as menopause approaches, including a drop in estrogen, which may be responsible for increased pain sensitivity and a higher risk of arthritis. In general, estrogen has an anti-inflammatory effect on the body, while low estrogen levels allow pain-producing chemicals to escalate.
- **Inflammatory diet –** Menopause can spark other changes in lifestyle, especially regarding diet and exercise. More pain and discomfort can lead to less exercise, more comforting foods, and possibly weight gain – and these changes can all encourage inflammation in the joints.

- **Stress –** Hormonal changes bring emotional and physical stress, and chronic stress can keep cortisol levels elevated. Since high levels of cortisol contribute to chronic inflammation, a stressful routine can actually cause you more pain than you might imagine. Stress and hormonal imbalance can both lead to depression, which is another possible source of ongoing pain.

Avoiding Inflammation During Menopause

Pain relievers can be very helpful when pain strikes, and estrogen therapy can bring long-term relief as the body adjusts. However, narcotics and hormone replacement may simply cover up the root of the inflammation, rather than solve the chronic underlying issue.

The more anti-inflammatory strategies you can incorporate into your day, the better you'll be able to control your joint pain and restore comfort:

- **Avoid repetitive strain –** Although exercise is important for maintaining range of motion, sore joints need care. Rest inflamed joints as needed, and try not to make matters worse by overworking any specific area. Recovery is an important part of an active lifestyle.

- **Eat anti-inflammatory foods –** Refined sugars, corn, citrus and plants of the nightshade family (eggplant, tomatoes and potatoes) are generally linked to inflammation. In contrast, fatty fish is high in inflammation-fighting omega 3, whole grains can reduce the amount of C-reactive protein (a marker of inflammation in the blood), and nuts are loaded with vitamin E and antioxidants to help your body repair the effects of inflammation.

- **Communicate well –** Talk to your doctor about your pain, and report any changes as they come up. Arthritis can be treated, but treatment can be much more effective when the condition is caught early.

Pain is your body's way of telling you something is wrong, so don't ignore the message. The key is to find a balance between rest and exercise, and treating the root cause instead of eradicating the symptoms. It can take some time to find the perfect approach to your pain management, but don't discount your own ability to change your physical health and comfort level.