Exercise and Menopause

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How Exercise Can Improve Your Menopausal Years

Although running around the block won't relieve your hot flashes, it could help you cope with them better. Experts agree that exercise isn't a cure-all for your menopausal symptoms, but it does target the roots of some discomforts, and it sets the stage for better days, weeks and years to come.

A well-rounded exercise routine during menopause is pretty powerful when it comes to health and longevity, but the complex changes of menopause do call for a careful approach to workouts. In the end, the better you can predict and prepare for possible challenges, the more you can get from your active lifestyle.

The Importance of Exercise during Menopause and Beyond

Once you enter menopause, your risk of heart disease, diabetes, breast cancer, and other chronic illnesses tends to climb rather abruptly. In turn, doctors recommended some swift and permanent lifestyle changes, including regular exercise. While regular activity can keep cardiac and metabolic conditions at bay, it can also bring more immediate benefits for your body and mind:

- **Muscle and bone maintenance.** Once you transition into menopause and your estrogen levels drop, your bones and muscles begin to weaken. In fact, loss of strength in postmenopausal women is a major concern; together with oxidative stress and inflammation arising from other conditions, the decline in estrogen could leave you vulnerable to injury and disease.Exercise builds muscle and maintains strength, which will certainly help to counteract your hormone-related muscle loss. Weight bearing exercise can also help protect your bone density, and since osteoporosis becomes a major health risk for women after menopause, weight lifting and resistance training can be an important preventative measure.

- **Stress relief.** For most women dealing with the varied discomforts of perimenopause and menopause, less stress can mean a big improvement in quality of life. Stress generally increases as menopause approaches, and your body releases more cortisol and adrenalin in response. Too much of these stress hormones can lead to insomnia, weight gain, and even heart disease and depression, but when you exercise your body releases calming endorphins, and you can begin to enjoy a positive, balanced mood.
- **Better sleep quality**. Insomnia, night sweats, and restless sleep are common complaints during menopause, and they can contribute to more severe conditions, like depression, anxiety, and obstructive sleep apnea. Fluctuating hormones are to blame, and while you can't change those levels (without HRT), exercise can make a significant difference in your quality of sleep: studies show that 150 minutes of exercise each week can improve sleep quality by up to 65%, and decrease some related discomforts, like leg cramps.

Next page: workouts for menopausal women.

Great Workouts for Menopausal Women

Most exercise is fair game if you're in relatively good health, but you should tailor your type of activity, frequency, and intensity to your current level of fitness. Consult your doctor about specific guidelines for your unique state of health, and then build a balanced exercise regimen including:

- **Low impact cardio**. Swimming, jogging, walking, and biking are good activities to try, and you don't have to test your limits from the start. In fact, begin with 10 minute intervals, and add a few minutes to each workout as your fitness increases. Don't rush things – you're less likely to get injured when you gradually increase the duration and intensity. If conventional cardio exercise doesn't suit you, try a dance class for a fun way to keep your muscles moving.
- **Resistance training.** Strength training (anaerobic exercise) is particularly useful during menopause, since it helps to maintain bone density. Resistance bands and tubes are great to use at home, since they provide gentle resistance and rely on simple movements to target a variety of muscle groups. If you're in the gym, free weights can be a good option: start with a few sets of 10 or 12 repetitions, and try to find a spot in front of a mirror to monitor your form.
- **Stretching and meditation**. Since stress is a prominent – and disruptive – symptom of menopause, you should take some time to actively reduce your stress (and your body's stress response). Yoga and meditation are fantastic ways to calm your mind and body, but you don't need a full class or strict parameters to enjoy the relaxing and calming effects. A few restorative yoga poses or 10 minutes of meditation at the end of your day can reduce fatigue and irritability, improve balance, and center your mind.

Precautions to Stay Healthy and Active

Anybody should be able to avoid injury and complications if they start low and build up gradually, but there are some specific concerns for active women in menopause. Most importantly, you should aim to keep your body comfortable, and stay focused on the long-term benefits:

- **Set realistic goals**. Be specific about what you want to achieve, and realistic about how you're going to get there. For instance, you can aim to lose 10 pounds, but give yourself at least a few months to do so, and don't beat yourself up if you fall a little short. Fitness is psychologically demanding as well as physically demanding, and those who have a healthy, positive mental approach will find it much easier to stay on track.

- **Beware of high impact activities**. On the one hand, high impact, repetitive movements (think jogging, jumping, or skipping) are excellent for bone health, but they also carry the biggest risk for injury. If your doctor has determined that you are at risk for osteoporosis, you'll need to take extra care to prevent falls, and perhaps adjust your activities. Swimming combines the best of both worlds: the water resistance promises an aerobic workout, but can also build up major muscle groups.
- **Dress appropriately**. Hot flashes are difficult to ignore, and they can be particularly bothersome when coupled with a vigorous workout. Take steps to offset the discomfort with light, technical clothing (synthetic sweat-wicking brands are your best bet for a cooler workout) and be sure there's a fan nearby to keep air circulating. Pop a damp towel in the fridge or freezer for a few minutes before your workout, and keep it by your side during your exercise so you can cool down quickly if you need to.

Conclusion

Remember you don't need fancy equipment or a gym membership to stay in shape, and there are a variety of print and video resources to guide you through a healthy routine. If you want to track your progress, considering keeping a journal to record your feelings and challenges relating to your workouts – your insights and positive thoughts are more helpful than the numbers on a scale, and a journal will help you to fine-tune your routine and adjust your goals for a more rewarding exercise routine.