

Exercise Recommendations for Menopause

Symptoms

The symptoms of menopause are numerous, and they can affect the quality of life of women moving through this stage. The good news is that exercise can often help reduce menopause-related symptoms.

Menopause is the term commonly used to refer to the period of time both before and after a woman's last menstrual period. Technically, menopause is a woman's last menstrual period, while the time period immediately prior to menopause is referred to as "peri-menopause" and the time following menopause is referred to as "post-menopause."

This process of changing hormone levels can last for more than 10 years and women may experience widely varying hormone levels, specifically estrogen, progesterone, follicle stimulating hormone, and luteinizing hormone. These hormones alone, and in combination, are responsible for a wide range of processes within the body.

The changes that occur during this stage of life may result in disruptions to normal daily living. These disruptions may include hot flashes, sleep disruption, weight gain, loss of libido, short term memory impairment or a lack of focus, increased anxiety, fatigue, depression and drastic mood swings, joint/muscle aches and pains, irregular periods, heavy bleeding, dry eyes, vaginal changes, hair loss, osteoporosis, and cardiovascular disease – most of which can be lessened with an effective exercise program. It is important to note that not all women experience the same changes or with similar intensity, which is one reason why menopause can be quite frustrating for many women.

Special consideration should be given for those women who are especially affected by hot flashes. Research has shown that a relaxation-based method with paced respiration significantly reduces objectively measured hot flash occurrence. With this in mind, programs that encourage focused relaxation and breathing, such as yoga, may be beneficial for reducing hot flashes. While the benefits of cardiovascular activity are numerous, researchers have not consistently found positive effects specific to hot flashes, although it may work for some women.

It is important to consult your physician on a regular schedule as peri-menopause approaches and work with him or her to balance the changing needs of your body. Be sure to use exercise to help manage complications brought about by this life change.



Benefits of exercise

Research has demonstrated the positive effects of exercise and physical activity on reducing menopausal symptoms. Interestingly, the positive changes do not seem to be brought on by "correction" of hormonal concentration but rather from the acute effects of exercise and the long-term positive adaptations that result from exercise training. The positive outcomes resulting from regular exercise and/or physical activity programs include increased cardiovascular fitness, improvements in body composition, decreased anxiety and depression, and enhanced feelings of wellbeing. Additionally, exercise and/or physical activity has, in some cases, been shown to decrease feelings of fatigue and chronic muscle pain, improve quality and duration of sleep, and increase or minimize loss of bone density.

The exercise recommendations for women in either peri- or post-menopause are very similar to those recommended for all women. Starting an exercise program can be a difficult task, especially during a time when hormonal fluctuations result in a variety of physiological and psychological changes. The key is to remember that the main goal is to boost your health and minimize any symptoms brought about by natural body changes.

It is important to choose activities that you enjoy. Any cardiovascular activity (brisk walking, cycling, water aerobics, mowing the lawn) that causes you to elevate your heart rate and break a sweat while still able to carry on a conversation is adequate for meeting the recommended 30 minutes a day, five days a week (or 150 minutes per week). Even short bouts of exercise lasting at least 10 minutes can be accumulated toward the 30-minutes-per-day goal. In addition to cardiovascular exercise, twice-a-week bouts of strength training with at least eight exercises of eight to 12 repetitions working the whole body can result in positive outcomes. For both cardiovascular and strength training exercises, remember to increase the amount of exercise gradually, starting with realistic amounts and moving toward achieving the minimum recommendations. Exceeding the minimum recommendations further reduces the risk of inactivity-related chronic disease and may be helpful in minimizing symptoms of menopause.

See your Healthwise exercise sheets.