

Moving Through MENOPAUSE

Exercising Reduces Symptoms

by Marlaina Donato

Transitioning through menopause and the years of perimenopausal hormone fluctuation leading up to the finale can be physically and emotionally challenging for many women. Consistently following a healthy diet and positive lifestyle are important, and health researchers, doctors and midlife women can attest to the multidimensional benefits of exercise. Perks may include reduction of menopausal discomfort, better brain function, stronger bones and reversal of estrogen dominance syndrome that can set the stage for fibroids, cystic breasts, cancer, migraines and weight gain.

Get Moving

Studies of 3,500 women in South and Central America have shown that a more active life reduces hot flashes and night sweats. The



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results, published in *Menopause*, the journal of the North American Menopause Society, reveal that sedentary individuals often experience increased intensity of related symptoms like insomnia and irritability. Aerobic exercise such as regular walking, hiking, swimming or biking might also help the brain produce neurochemicals that are compromised when estrogen levels drop.

Sue Markovitch, author and owner of Clear Rock Fitness, in Columbus, Ohio, recommends aerobic exercise. “I believe our bodies were made to move. One of the amazing gifts of fitness is it’s truly never too late. When we incorporate daily movement

in our lives, all the other systems in the body will work more according to plan. Simply taking a daily walk helps balance brain chemistry,” says Markovitch, who specializes in improving fitness levels for women over 40. “Walking is fitness magic, whether it’s on a treadmill, outside or in the pool. Get your heart rate into an aerobic zone, preferably for 30 to 45 minutes. I’ve heard testimony after testimony of improved sleep, less back or joint pain and better mood.” She also suggests adding a few weekly sessions of resistance training to daily walks.

Most health professionals agree that balance is the key. Jeanne D. Andrus, a menopause expert and author of *I Just Want to Be ME Again*, in Covington, Louisiana, recommends cardio, resistance training and exercise that increases flexibility and core strength. “For a beginner, this may include two to four days of walking, one to three days of strength training and one to three days of yoga or Pilates, with the goal being three and a half hours of activity per week.”

Of course, all of these need to be at appropriate levels for the woman’s condition and goals,” advises Andrus.

According to studies led by Helen Jones, Ph.D., from the Research Institute for Sport and Exercise Sciences at Liverpool John Moores University, UK, three, 30-to-45-minute aerobic sessions a week reduced hot flashes and yielded the most significant results.

Go Easy

While some conventional approaches suggest vigorous exercise, many holistic professionals caution against extremes. “It’s important to individualize, and in my ongoing research it’s clear that the high-intensity strength and sculpting approach so often promoted and perceived as necessary to maintain shape, weight and health is a myth,” says Dr. Eden Fromberg, an obstetrician, gynecologist and founder of Holistic Gynecology New York, in Manhattan.

Instead, Fromberg recommends an integrated approach to exercise that supports connective tissue and joints. While some forms of exercise including yoga are perceived as gentler than others, she warns against an all-or-nothing strategy, noting,

“Intense, deep stretching and joint-straining may cause injury more easily during hormonal transition.”

Andrus concurs, “If high cortisol levels are involved and accompanied by insomnia, stress placed on the body by rigorous exercise will increase these levels and actually lower available energy.” She also advises adopting a non-aggressive approach for osteoporosis. “Weight-bearing exercise is a must, but if bone loss is already present, start much more gradually to ensure that bones are protected.”

Lighten Up

Exercise can be more enjoyable than doing chores. Recreational activities such as danc-

ing, biking or hopping on the swings at the playground are fun ways to do something good for both body and spirit.

Menopause can be a time for personal expansion and an invitation for self-care that might have been neglected or postponed. Fromberg believes we can all revitalize our resources at any stage of life, and the years surrounding menopause call for us to tune into ourselves even more. “What seems like a disruption is an opportunity to listen deeply and reimagine and reorganize one’s life on physical, emotional and spiritual levels.”

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