Exercise in menopause

A healthy menopause lifestyle needs to include exercise to support mind, body and soul. Even if you've never exercised before, now's the time to find what works for you.

Do I need to exercise if I'm trying to lose weight?

While weight loss is possible without exercise, it's much easier to manage weight with exercise as a regular part of your lifestyle. Exercise can aid weight loss by increasing the amount of energy used by the body, making an energy deficit, and weight loss, much easier.

Many women find their body shape changes with menopause, with an increase in body fat around the stomach. Strength-based exercise, discussed in more detail later on, can favourably help with this.

What types of exercise should I be doing?

There are three types of exercise that are beneficial during perimenopause and menopause – strength-based, steps and restorative. Each is equally important.

Strength exercise helps to build and maintain muscle mass, which increases metabolic rate. This is important, because decreased estrogen levels during menopause cause muscle mass to decline, which in turn causes metabolism to decrease – one reason why weight gain is seemingly so much easier during perimenopause and menopause.

Your metabolic rate is personal to you. It's the rate at which your body uses calories. If your metabolic rate slows down, you need fewer calories and if it increases, you need more calories. A big determinant of metabolic rate is the amount of lean muscle tissue your body holds compared to fat. More muscle tissue means faster metabolic rate. You lose some muscle tissue as you age which is why it's so important to try to include some regular strength exercise. Strength exercise is the best way to build new muscle.

Focus on working larger muscle groups, such as the hamstrings and quadriceps in the legs, abdominal muscles, and biceps and triceps in the upper arms. Exercises you could try include:

- Body weight squats
- Box press ups
- Abdominal curls
- Bicep curls

Steps and walking are an accessible and affordable form of exercise for many people. A simple walking movement has many benefits. It is weight-bearing, which helps strengthen bones. It increases energy expenditure, which helps with weight management. It is also cardiovascular, and supports heart health. Use a simple fitness watch or health app on a smartphone to

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monitor steps and aim to gradually increase your daily step count. Try including small bursts of walking throughout the day. For example, a 15 minute walk during your lunch break and a 15 minute walk in the evening.

Restorative exercises such as yoga and pilates help the body to recover and heal, and can also help to increase strength and flexibility.

What are the benefits of exercise?

There are many benefits of exercise that aren't just about weight management. Exercise can help support emotional wellbeing, including stress and anxiety management. It can also help prevent the mental decline that occurs with ageing. Quality of sleep may also improve with regular exercise. Other short-term benefits include digestive relief and, contrary to popular belief, joint and muscle pain relief.

Regular strength-based exercise will help to build and maintain muscle mass, which will increase metabolism. Weight-bearing exercises, such as walking, help to build bone density and strengthen bones. Maintaining good bone health is important during perimenopause and menopause because declining estrogen causes greater losses in bone density, which increases the risk of developing osteoporosis, and in turn bone fractures and a greater risk of falls.

Regular exercise also supports good heart health, by helping to control blood pressure. It can even reduce resting heart rate. A woman's risk of heart disease increases during menopause due to the loss of estrogen, which is thought to be protective against heart disease. In postmenopausal women, heart disease is one of the top causes of death.

How can I start moving more?

Knowing where to start with exercise can feel overwhelming, particularly if you haven't exercised in a long time, or perhaps ever before. It doesn't have to be. The following tips may help:

- Start slowly with an exercise that feels manageable, such as a 15 minute walk. Time and intensity can be increased as you improve fitness and confidence.
- Find your reason for exercising and use it for motivation. From moving your body more to help reduce your risk of heart disease, to having more energy to play with children and grandchildren, or getting back into a once favourite dress, make exercise matter.
- Find a friend to exercise with or to check in on your progress.
- Try something new. Join a new exercise class or try an online workout. Cycling, swimming, dancing and other sports all count. Exercise isn't just about the gym.
- Celebrate your successes, no matter how small. Every time you exercise you're benefiting your health.
- If pelvic floor weakness is holding you back, visit a women's health physiotherapist for more specific advice to improve your pelvic floor health.

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Useful contacts

National Health Service (NHS) | Exercise
www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/

The British Heart Foundation
www.bhf.org.uk/

WHC Fact Sheet | Osteoporosis: bone health following the menopause
WHC Fact Sheet | Urogenital problems
WHC Fact Sheet | Coronary heart disease
www.womens-health-concern.org/help-and-advice/factsheets/

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This Women's Health Concern fact sheet provides information and guidance, to be used in consultation with your own healthcare professional. It has been reviewed by the medical advisory council of the British Menopause Society and it will be updated when guidance changes and/or new data becomes available.

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