

Maximize your health during and after menopause

Menopause is a natural transition in a woman's life. Each woman experiences it differently, but two health issues stand out. One is heart health and the other is body composition -- muscle loss and fat gain.¹ Active living and healthy eating from a young age are the best ways to minimize these health issues. But it is never too late to get the benefits of a healthy lifestyle.²

Menopause and heart health

After menopause, a woman's risk of heart disease rises drastically.³ One reason for this is the change in hormones, which leads to stiffer arteries and higher blood pressure.

Menopause and weight

The hormonal changes of menopause also alter the way we metabolize fat. Scientists are still studying why some women are more likely to gain weight and have a harder time losing it during and after menopause. Genes, age at menopause, and race can be factors. Other factors, like stress and poor sleep, can also contribute to weight gain.

Weight gain is not always a concern, it is only when it puts a woman in an unhealthy weight category such as obesity. When that happens, there is increased risk of cardiovascular disease, some cancers, and type II diabetes.⁴

Some changes to the way we metabolize fat may not show up on the scale, but still be a concern. There may be less fat on the buttocks, hips, and thighs. At the same time, there may be an increase in abdominal (belly) fat. Fat can also build up inside the abdominal cavity (visceral fat).

Menopause and muscle loss

Menopausal muscle loss, added to general muscle loss due to aging, can lead to a condition called sarcopenia, with frailty and increased risk of falls. But lifestyle factors, including physical activity and nutrition can lessen these changes.

Is there a special 'workout' for menopause?

If you are already active, assess your workout routine. Are you doing all four types of activity recommended in physical activity guidelines? These are aerobic, strength, balance, and flexibility training. They all have unique benefits to health and fitness.

It is a good idea to start strength training before menopause. Balance training is something to pay more attention to as we get older. Give it 'equal billing' in terms of time and frequency to the aerobic and strength components of your workout.

When you assess your workout routine, do an 'intensity check'. Do you still challenge yourself or have you hit a plateau? Is your workout in the moderate to vigorous intensity range? Better fitness comes from progression—increasing the intensity of workouts. This counters the year-to-year decline in aerobic and muscle function. It makes you better able to reduce the health risks that come with menopause.

Can physical activity help with hot flashes and other symptoms of menopause?

Research is not conclusive on whether being physically active can help with hot flashes. But we do know that it can help with other menopause symptoms, such as anxiety. Physical activity improves mental wellbeing and self-esteem.⁵

Healthy eating and menopause

Healthy eating at any age is important. It is even more important at menopause, when the risk of heart disease accelerates. A healthy diet can also help with weight management.

Some types of diet have been shown to lower these indicators for heart disease:

- total and low-density lipoprotein cholesterol levels

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- systolic blood pressure
- fasting blood sugar levels.⁶

The types of diet that have been shown to do this are:

- Mediterranean diets with lots of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and legumes
- The DASH diet (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension): This long-term diet focuses on limiting sodium intake, portion control, and eating a variety of plant-based foods.
- Fat-modified diets that aim for less than 30% saturated fat.

At menopause, it is very important to increase protein intake (meats and high-protein vegetables). This helps to retain muscle mass and control fat gain. Protein is also critical for strength training to maintain or increase muscle. Research suggests that as we get older, we need to consume more than the recommended amount of daily protein.⁷

Its never too late to start being physically active and making healthier food choices this will reduce health risk associated with menopause and allow you to go into your golden years healthy, strong and fit.

Resources:

Get started with our booklet *Physical Activity for Older Adults*. It gives you the ABCs on how to become physically active:
<https://www.activeagingcanada.ca/participants/get-active/active-agers-in-canada.htm>

Guidance on Strength Training:
<https://www.activeagingcanada.ca/newsletter/active-aging-network/v02-issue003-2022-03-the-role-of-muscle-in-healthy-aging.htm>

Maximize your Strength Training Workouts with Protein:
<https://www.activeagingcanada.ca/newsletter/active-aging-network/v01-issue004-2021-04-Maximize-your-Strength-Training-Workouts-with-Protein.htm>

Healthy Eating for Seniors:
<https://food-guide.canada.ca/en/tips-for-healthy-eating/seniors/>

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