



Ask the Expert with Dr. Darrell Menard

Find Answers to your Sport Medicine Questions!

Exercise and Menopause

Q: *My sister is 4 years older than me and she is already experiencing menopause. Unfortunately she is having significant symptoms and so did our mother. Given my family history, I am concerned I will experience a challenging menopause. I have been very active my entire life and wonder if regular exercise will help me better cope when my change of life occurs. Premenopausal Manon*

A: Dear Premenopausal Manon: Great to hear you are committed to active living. Every woman experiences menopause differently. Some women have mild symptoms while others like your sister and mother have a much harder time. In addition to symptoms, it is important to remember that after menopause the risk of certain diseases such as breast cancer, cardiovascular disease and osteoporosis increases. The good news is that there are things you can do to help fight the effects of menopause and regular exercise is one of them. The benefits exercise offers to menopausal women do not appear to be related to correcting the hormonal changes that occur with this condition. Rather the effects seem to be a result of the short and long term benefits that regular exercise offers everyone. These benefits include increased cardiovascular fitness, lower 'bad' cholesterol and fats, higher 'good' cholesterol and fats, reduced body fat, increased muscle mass, reduced anxiety and depression and enhanced feelings of wellbeing. Some studies have also shown regular exercise can reduce fatigue, chronic muscle pain, decrease the intensity of hot flashes, improve sleep and increase bone mass or at least reduce the rate of bone loss.

To achieve these benefits you don't need to train like an Olympian. What you do need to do is exercise "regularly" and try to ensure that your program includes 3 basic components: 1. Cardiovascular activities such as walking, running, swimming and cycling for 150 minutes/week at a moderate intensity or 75 minutes/week at a higher intensity; 2. Strength training activities such as core work, weights, yoga, and calisthenics – try this 2 or more times/week; 3. Flexibility work – such as stretching and yoga – incorporated into every workout. It is important to note that to increase your bone mass or reduce the rate of bone loss you need to do impact activities and exercises where your muscles pull on bones – you will get this from your cardiovascular and strength training.

The bottom line is that regular exercise may not eliminate all of your menopausal symptoms. What it will do is help you cope better with your symptoms and hopefully reduce your risk of developing the serious diseases that become more common after menopause. Menopause may change your life but regular exercise is life changing!

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Dr. Darrell Menard is the Surgeon General's specialist advisor in sport medicine. He has worked extensively with athletes from multiple sports and has covered Canadian teams competing at multiple games including the 2012 Olympics and the 2016 Paralympic games. These articles were originally published in the Canadian Forces Journal, the Maple Leaf.

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