

by Dixie L. Thompson, Ph.D., FACSM

## Menopause and Exercise

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**N**ight sweats, hot flashes, high blood pressure, and osteoporosis—does this sound like a list of things you would like to avoid? For women facing menopause, exercise may be part of the answer.

### ✕ Chronic Disease Risk

A woman's risk for heart disease and type 2 diabetes is higher once she enters menopause. This is linked with changes in blood pressure, cholesterol, and glucose levels. Research shows that regular exercise helps control these risk factors and lowers a woman's overall chance for developing disease. A University of Tennessee study demonstrated that when postmenopausal women began walking 2 miles each day, they lowered their blood pressure level, and some even brought their blood pressure level within normal limits. In the Women's Health Study, women who walked 2 or more hours per week cut their risk for coronary heart disease by more than half. Exercise is a critical lifestyle factor in helping women avoid chronic disease.

### ✕ Osteoporosis

All people lose bone as they get older, and this is particularly apparent in postmenopausal women. This sometimes crippling disease impacts more than eight million American women. It is estimated that more than half of all women older than 50 years will have an osteoporosis-related fracture during their lifetime. Fortunately, a number of effective

pharmaceutical agents have been developed to treat this disease, but from a prevention standpoint, exercise can be effective in helping maintain strong bones. Both weight-bearing exercise such as walking and resistance training (*i.e.*, weight lifting) can help minimize bone loss. When bones are stronger, fracture risk is lower. The Nurses' Health Study indicated that the risk for hip fracture in postmenopausal women was reduced by 6% for every hour spent walking per week.

### ✕ Weight Management

A loss of muscle mass and an increase in abdominal fat are common at the time of menopause. Regular exercise is effective at fighting both of these changes. Exercise stimulates muscle and helps alleviate age-related muscle loss. In addition, the calories expended during exercise help maintain a healthy body weight and minimize the accumulation of abdominal fat, a particularly harmful alteration in body composition. In a group of postmenopausal women studied at the University of Tennessee, active women had 13 lbs less fat on their trunks, and their waists were 7 inches smaller than sedentary women.

### ✕ Menopausal Symptoms

Hot flashes, mood disturbances, and problems with sleep are common complaints during the menopausal transition. The impact of exercise on these symptoms has been investigated, but the results are not always clear. Some, but not all, women experience relief from these symptoms when they begin regular exercise. For those women who do experience relief, the improvement in quality of life is significant.

Getting regular exercise is a lifestyle choice with the potential to greatly improve a woman's health. Although aging brings increased risk for disease, exercise can help. ACSM recommends that adults get at least 30 minutes of aerobic exercise each day. Fitness professionals can help develop specific exercise plans to meet individual needs.

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