

Exercise and Menopause

Changing hormone levels associated with menopause are not necessarily the cause of weight gain. While the weight gain that occurs mid-life does tend to settle around the waist, research finds it is because of decreased muscle mass, reduced metabolic activity, less physical activity, and an increased caloric intake. With less activity there is a decreased expenditure of calories. As muscle mass decreases, metabolic function decreases and weight increases unless caloric intake is also limited.

Decreased activity may be caused by:

- Depression
- Hot flashes
- Night sweats
- Poor sleep or insomnia
- Appetite disturbances
- Decreased physical demands
- Lifestyle changes
- Decreased activity-based support systems
- Joint pain and injuries
- Decreased stamina
- Medical conditions
- Medications that affect appetite, sleep, or digestion

Strength Training

Strength training is one of the most important factors in maintaining metabolic function as women age. Compared to their sedentary counterparts, women who do strength training:

- Have more youthful profiles
- Have better bones
- Are stronger
- Have better balance
- Have more muscle tissue

Some guidelines to follow:

- Strength training: Start slowly with little or no weight to establish the range of motion and practice safe movement; increase frequency to 8-10 repetitions of the movement; repeat repetitions, with progression to two or three sets
- Exercise slowly: Perform your exercises slowly, with 3 seconds to lift, one second to hold, and a slow release to neutral position
- Use weights: Use ankle weights for legs and partially filled milk jugs or soup cans for the upper body as hand weights, increasing weight as the exercise becomes easier
- Breathe properly: Proper breathing is essential to each exercise, and the exhale should happen during the lift phase, and with the inhale as the weight is lowered
- Exercise regularly: Perform exercises 2-3 days per week, for approximately 30-45 minutes each day you exercise

Some exercises to try

- Knee extension: Seated in a chair, with or without ankle weights, lift and extend each leg, alternating between each leg
- Side shoulder raise: Seated in a chair with arms straight down at the sides, slowly raise both arms up to shoulder height with palms facing down (may perform holding soup cans or handheld weights)
- Knee flexion: Standing behind a chair, bend one knee and lift your heel toward the buttocks, as high as it can go ; lower leg and repeat with the alternate leg
- Biceps curl: Seated in a chair with arms down at the sides, slowly bend elbows one at a time and bring the fist toward the bicep, while keeping the upper arm still; lower and repeat with other arm

Aerobic activity

Aerobic activity is essential to cardiovascular functioning and health. Walking is the most recommended activity for women, as it is essential to overall health and requires no equipment. A total of 50 minutes/day is recommended for bone health and cardiovascular functioning, as well as for weight management. Start with 10 minutes a day and slowly work up to the 50 minutes. Every step counts. Many sources recommend walking 10,000 steps per day. Pedometers can be purchased to count your steps.

As you age there is no magic formula to avoid weight gain. The key is to watch what you eat and exercise as much as possible.

References:

Weight gain after menopause. MayoClinic.com. Available at: <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/menopauseweight-gain/HQ01076/METHOD=print>. Accessed 12/31/09.

Clark N. Sports Nutrition Guidebook 3rd ed. Brookline, MA: Human Kinetics; 2003.