



# Manage Menopause with Exercise

**By Robin Weiss Director of Fitness**

We've all heard the jokes and the horror stories. But, those of us dealing with perimenopause, menopause, or postmenopause aren't interested in jokes or stories; we want solutions! Well, I've got good news. If we're willing to stay fit, or get fit, we can manage this challenging time in our lives.

Physical activity is the most effective alternative therapy available for those of us suffering menopausal symptoms. It allows us to manage both our bodies and our emotions.

NOTE: This article addresses common menopausal symptoms. Specific treatment for severe symptoms should be determined by you and your healthcare provider.

The female hormone, estrogen, has many important roles that become more apparent when levels decline prior to and after menopause. When we exercise, our adrenal glands are stimulated to convert the male hormone androstenedione into estrogen. Just four 30-minute exercise sessions per week can keep us "topped off" with estrogen.

Regular exercise has many other benefits as we pass through menopause and our estrogen levels decline. It strengthens our heart and bones, helps us avoid or minimize weight gain, improves our mood and sense of overall well-being, and reduces the duration and intensity of those infamous hot flashes. In recent studies, researchers have found that women who exercise are able to handle menopause without Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) and some of us do not experience hot flashes or mood swings at all.

Along with estrogen, endorphins help regulate body temperature. So, an increase in their level can diminish the frequency and intensity of hot flashes. Physical activity does a great job of raising the level of endorphins in our blood. In a recent study of postmenopausal women, physical activity

reduced severe hot flashes and night sweats by half. Endorphins have been nicknamed the "feel-good" biochemicals because they also enhance our mood and allow us to respond positively when dealing with stress.

On the flip side, being sedentary as we approach menopause opens us to many potential problems. Sedentary women are far more prone to heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and obesity. We're also more likely to suffer stiffness and chronic back pain, irregularity, poor circulation, shortness of breath, weak muscles, depression, and sleep disturbances. Aerobic activities such as walking, jogging, dancing, swimming, and biking help circumvent these problems. Studies have also shown that women engaging in aerobic activity or strength training have reduced mortality from cancer.

Lack of muscle strengthening activity and menopausal estrogen deficiency are strongly correlated with a reduction in bone mineral density, which causes our bones to diminish in size and strength. This sets us up for osteoporosis and an increased risk of bone fractures in our later years. Resistance training exercises stimulate the cells that help generate new bone tissue. So, bone mass lost through disuse can be rebuilt with weight-bearing activity. Even in our postmenopausal years we can help preserve bone mass in our spine with a routine of muscle strengthening exercises.

There's more good news. Regular exercise may allow us to maintain better mental agility in our postmenopausal years by increasing the amount of oxygen delivered to our brain. A study comparing older women who were sedentary with older women who exercised regularly for four months, found that the active group processed information faster, which resulted in faster reaction times. Exercise can further enhance our reaction times by slowing down the loss of dopamine, a neurotransmitter that helps prevent the shaking and stiffness that often comes with old age.

By taking care of the body we're in, we'll be prepared as we gear up for, soar through, or function after menopause. With physical activity -- resistance training, aerobic activity, and don't forget stretching exercises to improve and maintain our flexibility -- we may still have those flashes, but they'll be warm rather than hot, and a lot easier to endure!

References: Sparkpeople.com 2008; Womenshealthcareforum.com 2008; en.Wikipedia.org 2008