
Exercise suggested for menopause symptoms

By CANDICE CHOI, Associated Press Writer
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ALBANY, N.Y. - Once at the mercy of hourly hot flashes, Margaret Corino has been keeping them at bay with regular trips to the gym.

When the 58-year-old woman skips exercise, the waves of heat "shoot back up again," she says. Corino, who lives in Johnson City, west of Albany, says her workouts have reduced hot flashes to just a couple a day.

Though the research is still thin, many health experts say even moderate exercise can help relieve the problems of menopause in some women, including anxiety, insomnia and night sweats.

Menopause, which typically occurs between the ages of 45 and 55, is when a woman stops menstruating. Symptoms can range from mood swings, to hot flashes, headaches and trouble focusing.

The National Institutes of Health is conducting a wide-ranging study of several issues related to menopause, including depression, cognitive and sexual function. NIH-backed research so far only suggests a link between physical activity and decreased symptoms of menopause - no proof exercise is a cure.

For example, women who exercise may report fewer hot flashes simply because they are less preoccupied with such symptoms, said Sheryl Sherman, a doctor with the National Institute on Aging, an arm of NIH.

While experiences vary from woman to woman, some say even a little boost in physical activity goes a long way.

Just a week after starting a walking routine, 54-year-old Joan Newman saw a dramatic decline in hot flashes. "After that, every chance I got, I walked around the campus," said Newman, an administrative assistant at Missouri State University in Springfield, Mo.

She says her daily walks reduced hot flashes from hourly to five or six a day.

Dr. Lila Nachtigall, a spokeswoman for the North American Menopause Society, said it is critical for women to get exercise at this time of life despite the lack of conclusive evidence that exercise relieves menopausal symptoms.

As estrogen levels fall, it's easier for women to gain weight, Nachtigall said. Exercise also promotes an overall sense of well-being that helps women handle troublesome symptoms better, she said.

"It certainly can't hurt," she said.

Small studies have also suggested the pluses of exercise.

One by the American College of Sports Medicine showed strength training helped reduce hot flashes and headaches by 50 percent. Another published in the Journal of Advanced Nursing found exercise boosted overall health-related quality of life measures in menopausal women.

And a third in the Journal of the American College of Cardiology found exercise slowed the progression of hardening of the arteries, which is linked to lower levels of estrogen in women during menopause.

Exercise can lower the risk for cardiovascular disease in general and strengthen muscle to prevent fractures - another risk factor that grows as estrogen levels decline, said Barbara Bushman, a professor of health and physical education at Missouri State University and author of "Action Plan for Menopause."

At the very least, staying active can temper secondary effects of menopause like insomnia and weight gain, said Cedric Bryant, chief scientist for the American Council on Exercise.

"You may not be able to totally eliminate (the symptoms), but it seems you can certainly alleviate them," Bryant said.

With exercise touted as a magic bullet for boosting everything from mental acuity to mood, it's no surprise that it may help during menopause, said Alysia Mastrangelo, a professor of physical therapy at Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.

Yet many women now going through that transition may have grown up in a time when a premium wasn't placed on physical activity, Mastrangelo said. "This is a group that historically doesn't exercise."

Experiences vary greatly, however, and some say exercise doesn't seem to curb their hot flashes at all. Marilyn Matrazzo, a 56-year-old resident of Colonie, an Albany suburb, said she's not sure her daily workouts help temper her hot flashes. But she persists to maintain a general sense of well-being.

"It helps everything - I just have more 'oomph' during the day and sleep better," she said.



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