

Exercise and Menopause

Chalk it up to urban legend: Women postmenopause do not gain weight, especially in their middle, because of hormonal changes that occur with menopause. 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. This is reportedly caused by decreased expenditure of calories.

As people age, both men and women, muscle mass tends to decrease. Because lean body mass drives metabolic functioning, it makes sense that fat mass increases as people slow down their activity. Many things contribute to decreased activity in older women, including:

- Aches and pains
- Hot flashes
- Night sweat
- Poor sleep
- 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 in older women. Compared to their sedentary counterparts, older women who do strength training:

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

Home-based strength training is usually the most readily accepted by older women, because women can exercise in the privacy of their own homes. Women at all ends of the spectrum—from very frail to very fit—can perform simple movements.

Some guidelines 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

- **Breath 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/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 hand-held 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, requires no equipment, and fits well into most people's lives. A total of 50 minutes/day is recommended for bone health and cardiovascular functioning, as well as for weight management.

Reference

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

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