



Menopause: a time to train wisely

In our first strength and conditioning instalment of 2020, **Charlene Hutsebaut**, CSCS strength & conditioning specialist and pilates instructor, discusses the vital role of exercising during the menopause.

My friends, family and clients who are going through menopause, or have finished, say they don't care about the science. "Just tell me how to get out of this hot mess that is me, a me I no longer recognise" said one friend when I told her about this article. A new client said; "I'm really struggling to concentrate and focus at work and the last thing I want to do is exercise because I have no energy. Can you help me?"

The realities of menopause can be frustrating and messy: hot flushes coming on at just the wrong time, night sweats, interrupted sleep, weight gain, anxiety, depression, reduced libido, difficulty concentrating, and memory problems.

Menopause is a change of life. A change in biology and how our hormones operate, a change in the way we live as women. We know from the science and research that we can positively affect our physical structures as we go through menopause, and afterwards, despite there being proven expected changes to our muscles, tissues and bones. We can make a difference by exercising consistently and

intelligently week upon week for our entire life.

According to Leite et al (1): "Resistance training has been associated with increased strength, muscle and bone mass, and should be recommended as a non-pharmacological strategy, considering its influence in reducing and attenuating several alterations involved in this period (sarcopenia, osteopenia, insulin resistance, inflammatory markers, among others)."

On paper, going through menopause and beyond sounds simple: i.e. these are the physical changes that may happen and here are the actions you can take to keep yourself as healthy as possible. Unfortunately, keeping yourself conditioned during menopause is not

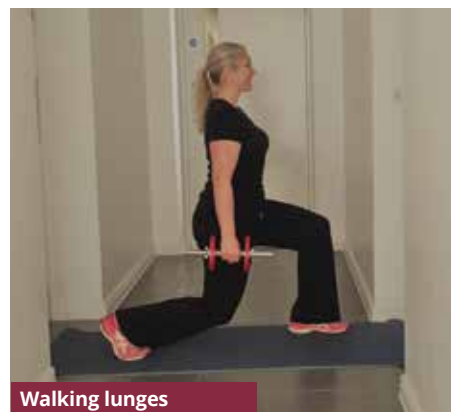
that straightforward. Matters are complicated further by a continued stigma around speaking about menopause, the dreaded symptoms, as well as the stresses and challenges of this chapter of a woman's life.

The science

Oestrogen is known to protect the heart, muscles and bones in women before menopause. With the decrease in oestrogen during and after menopause, women are more prone to heart disease, sarcopenia, as



Plank with 1-arm row



Walking lunges

well as osteopenia and osteoporosis.

Again, according to Leite et al (1): "The absence of oestrogen promotes an imbalance between bone reabsorption and formation, leading to osteoporosis, which is a bone metabolic disturbance." It therefore makes sense to protect our heart, muscles and bones simply by using them; choosing to do exercises that

Symptoms of menopause

(Source: Mayo Clinic)

- Irregular periods
- Vaginal dryness
- Hot flushes
- Chills
- Night sweats
- Sleep problems
- Mood changes
- Weight gain and slowed metabolism
- Thinning hair and dry skin
- Loss of breast fullness



Squat and shoulder press



work the heart and make it a stronger muscle, and to work the skeletal muscles to push and pull on bones, resulting in new bone tissue being formed. As we work our muscles, we increase their mass, which in turn has positive effects on our body composition.

Also, when we perform resistance training, we increase our levels of testosterone, which can be aromatised to oestradiol, which may be an important source of oestrogen in postmenopausal women. Could we then increase our oestrogen to healthier levels during and after menopause if we are exercising? More research needs to be done on this theory because low oestrogen is one of the



Chest presses



main reasons for many of the symptoms of menopause. In my experience, the symptoms are what really put women off exercising, especially lack of sleep, energy, focus and concentration, so it is important to somehow break this inactivity cycle.

The exercises

What if resistance training really is the non-pharmacological answer to menopausal symptoms and physical changes that we have all been looking for?

According to Berin et al (2): "A 15-week resistance-training programme decreased the frequency of moderate and severe hot flushes among postmenopausal women and could be an effective and safe treatment option to alleviate vasomotor symptoms."

Leite et al add (1): "Several studies mention progressive resistance training as a promising intervention to change body composition, reverse the sarcopenia process and the deterioration of muscle structure associated with menopause."

Going now into more specific detail, many studies suggest the following protocol range to achieve these results:

- A resistance training programme of three days per week
- 2-3 sets of 8-12 repetitions per exercise
- Rest for 60 to 90 seconds between sets
- Use up to eight different exercises at an intensity 80-85% of Repetition Maximum (1RM).

If you do not have a fitness or strength and conditioning professional to guide you through a 1RM test, I suggest using a 10RM test. You must feel challenged by the end of each set.

I mentioned earlier the realities of this chapter in a woman's life that can complicate being active. As a professional, I actually think that these challenges are underestimated, because they create a heavier 'life load' when in combination with the changes of menopause. Some examples of life load are: being in a full time job, running a business, raising children, caring for an ill parent, bereavement, various type of stress, low energy, and many others. Time and energy are two big barriers to exercise, so with the above exercise protocol in mind, I suggest using compound, functional, multi-joint exercises to ensure the most efficient use of your time. 15-20 minutes will get you through the protocol and it will feel like a double time frame three days per week:

Here are five such functional exercises, plus accompanying photographs:

- Plank with 1-arm woad
- Walking lunges
- Chest presses
- Squat & shoulder press
- Bent over rows

If you are a higher-level athlete going through menopause, and are finding symptoms impacting your training and performance,



Bent over rows



Speak with your coach about fine tuning your approach. Do you have resistance training in your programme? Are you getting enough rest and recovery? Also work with your nutritionist on finding the best support through food and supplements.

For any woman reading this, it may be difficult to hear, but our bodies operate differently in our 40s, 50s, and beyond. This isn't a bad thing – it is a change that we can work with. What we were able to do in our earlier years is now simply different. When you find a way to accept this new reality, you can start to redesign and refresh your behaviours to compliment and support your changing physiology.

I invite you to course correct, fine tune, and discover your optimal functioning moving forward. **fsn**

References

1. Leite RD et al (2010). Menopause: highlighting the effects of resistance training. *Int J Sports Med.* 31(11):761-767.
2. Berin E et al (2016). Resistance training for hot flushes in postmenopausal women: Randomized controlled trial protocol. *Maturitas.* 85:96-103.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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