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Going Mad for Menopause? Signs, Symptoms & Solutions

Mood swings, short-term memory loss, and sometimes difficulty thinking straight are common complaints from midlife women. These can affect women's mental health and sense of well-being. And while many of these symptoms are attributed to menopause, there are other contributing factors, including the following:

Hormones. During reproductive years, most women become accustomed to their own hormonal rhythm. When this rhythm is disrupted during perimenopause, mood changes may result.

Timing. The timing of menopause may coincide with a multitude of midlife stresses like relationship issues, divorce or widowhood, care of young children, struggles with adolescents, return of grown children to the home, being childless, concerns about aging parents, and caregiving responsibilities, as well as career and education issues.

Aging. Getting older in a society that values youth can be very demoralizing. Midlife women often experience changes in self-esteem and body image. Women may begin to consider their own mortality and dwell on the meaning or purpose of their lives.

While achieving optimal mental as well as physical health requires individualized solutions, the following suggestions have been helpful for many women.

Create balance. When dividing time between work obligations and caring for family, women need to remember that taking care of their own needs is equally important. With the onset of new tensions, recognizing a problem can lead to understanding its causes and developing new coping mechanisms. Keeping a balance between self, family, friends, and work allows women to meet new challenges and maintain self-confidence.

Evaluate levels of depression. Women who have previously been diagnosed with depression when they were younger are vulnerable to recurrent depression during perimenopause. Women suffering from depression (which is associated with a chemical imbalance in the brain) report symptoms of prolonged tiredness, loss of interest in normal activities, weight loss, sadness, or irritability.

Assess anxiety level. Physical and psychological changes as well as other midlife stressors can result in increased anxiety. Feelings of anticipation, dread, or fear are common and usually resolve without treatment. Frequent episodes of anxiety may be a warning sign of panic disorder. "Panic attack" symptoms include shortness of breath, chest pain, dizziness, heart palpitations, or feelings of "going crazy" or feeling out of control. Sometimes the unsettling feelings that precede a hot flash can mimic or trigger such an attack. Treatments include relaxation or stress reduction techniques, counseling or psychotherapy, and/or prescription drugs.

Mind your memory. Many perimenopausal women report difficulty concentrating or short-term memory problems. These difficulties often frighten women, who may think they have early symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. While this is rarely the case, studies suggest that remaining physically, socially, and mentally active may help prevent memory loss.

Seek additional help. Don't try to diagnose and treat yourself. No one should feel embarrassed about seeking attention for these symptoms. By evaluating symptoms as well as personal and family history, the appropriate health professional can provide expert relief recommendations. Remember, medication for depression is most effective when used in combination with counseling or psychotherapy.

The appropriate strategies will help women achieve a happier, healthier future.

The North American Menopause Society, November 2009

SIX MORE BENEFITS OF EXERCISE

1. **EXERCISE CAN CURB YOUR RISK OF CANCER -** Researchers tracked women in their 50s and 60s for seven years in the U.S. and found that those who reported more than an hour a day of moderate-to-vigorous activity – even if they hadn't exercised earlier in their lives – were 16% less likely to be diagnosed with breast cancer than those who rarely did any exercise.

Obesity is closely related to post-menopausal breast cancer, colorectal cancer, enodemetrial cancer, pancreatic cancer, and adenocarcinoma of the lower esophagus. However there is also accumulating evidence that obesity is also a risk factor for several of the blood-forming cancers i.e. leukemia and lymphoma. As a result, the American Cancer Society now recommends at least 30 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity at least five days a week.

2. **EXERCISE CREATES NEW BRAIN CELLS -** We know that older adults on average perform slower and less accurately on cognitive tests than younger people however there is evidence that older individuals who are more fit perform better to the point where they're sometimes no different from young adults. How does exercise do this? In lab animals, increased blood flow to the brain stimulates the growth of new brain cells, new connections or synapses between cells, and new capillaries to distribute the blood and its nutrients. In a 2006 study by Univeristy of Illinois researchers, 30 healthy but sedentary men and women aged 60-79 were put on an aerobic exercise training program. After six months, their brain volume – the amount of grey and white matter – had increased which meant more brain cells and more connections between them. This was not true in those who participated in a toning and stretching program.

Aerobic exercise in particular increases the supply of a protein called brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) which protects brain neurons and promotes the growth of new nerve cells and synpases related to learning and memory. BDNF is active in the hippocampus and in rats and mice, aerobic exercise increases the size of the hippocampus and improves spatial memory.

3. **EXERCISE BOOSTS INSULIN SENSITIVITY -** Insulin is a hormone that allows blood sugar to enter the body's cells, where it's stored or used as fuel. However as we age and/or put on weight, our bodies don't respond as well to insulin and we can become insensitive or resistant to the hormone. Insulin resistance increases the risk of heart disease and type 2 diabetes. Research shows that one of the most consistent effects of BOTH aerobic and strength training is that they improve insulin sensitivity and in a very short time.

4. **SITTING CAN KILL YOU -** People who sit for the majority of their day have much higher mortality rates than people who don't – even if they're physically active during another part of the day. Research is now showing that long periods of sitting cannot be compensated for with occasional leisure time physical activity.

Muscles seem to be extremely inactive while sitting, and this may changed the way they metabolize compounds and may affect the regulation of insulin and glucose. Good advice: stand up, walk around, do anything like that to increase the muscle activity in the lower limbs.

5. **YOU'RE NEVER TOO OLD TO BUILD MUSCLE -** The oldest person known to increase strength with resistance and weight training was 103 years old. Exercise physiologist Ben Hurley with the University of Maryland studied 23 healthy men and women aged 65-75 and had them do knee extension exercises three times a week on one leg. After nine weeks, the muscle volume in that leg increased by 12% and the leg could lift 28% more than the unexercised leg.

Women needn't worry that they will wind up looking like muscle men. Studies have shown that women increase their muscle mass only about half as much as men but with weight training, but women improve their STRENGTH just as much as men do. This is because women improve their muscle quality – the amount of force they can exert per muscle unit – more than men do when they train. It is important to build muscle three days a week but your strength improves quickly, sometimes after just one workout and it becomes noticeable often in as little as four weeks!

6. **EXERCISE PREVENTS VISCERAL FAT GAIN -** Visceral fat accumulates around the organs deep inside the belly. It is associated with insulin resistance, heart disease and diabetes. Unfortunately we all gain visceral fat as we get older unless we do something about it.

In 2005, a study in North Carolina was performed by Duke University Medical Center which reported that sedentary overweight men and women who followed an exercise program of a brisk 30 minute walk six times a week for eight months STOPPED gaining visceral fat. For those who did more exercise (equivalent of jogging 32 km) lost 7% of their abdominal fat. Even more shocking was that the control group (those were not told to step up their exercise) increased their visceral fat stores by 9%! Many studies have shown that aerobic exercise will reduce visceral fat as long as you keep doing it.