An article taken from the **Menopause & You** online program

The benefits of exercise during Menopause

Exercise is a lifelong activity and in menopause it becomes especially important. Activities that improve balance, strength, and cardiac health will help ensure better health as we age. Donna Levan outlines for us the various exercises that will help us reach the goal of improved health.

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Exercise Builds Bone Health

Osteoporosis is the medical term for thinning of the bones which primarily occurs in the bones of the spine, wrist, and hips. Although bones naturally weaken with increasing age after age 40, women lose bone mass program because you may have more rapidly after menopause. Making sure to get enough calcium in your diet can help strengthen bones. Regular weight bearing exercise like walking can help prevent osteoporosis. The full benefits of walking come from a regular schedule, or at least 15-20 minutes 3 to 4 days per week. But if you haven't been active for years, you may need to start modestly. Try increasing your don't increase the weight more walk until you reach the optimal exercise level determined by a health professional like a physical therapist. Remember to perform warm-up and cool-down exercises before each workout session no matter what type of exercise you are performing.

Both weight training and aerobic exercise enhance and maintain

bone density. Lifting weights or using strength training machines strengthens bones over your entire body, especially if you exercise all of the major muscle groups in your legs, arms, and trunk. Following a program designed for you by a doctor or physical therapist is important. Joining a gym or fitness facility is a good way to continue a resistance access to trainers who can supervise you on proper technique. Strength training is a slow process, so start at a low level and build up gradually over several months. For each exercise, select weights or set the machine so the muscle being trained becomes fatigued after 10 to 15 repetitions. As muscles strengthen, gradually add more weight. But than 10% per week, since a larger increase can raise you risk of injury. Remember to lift with good form, and don't sacrifice good form to lift more weight. Consulting with a physical therapist before starting with a strength training program will provide the fundamentals for good form and help you target areas that need strengthening.

Exercise Helps Maintain Heart Health

Heart disease in women rises sharply after menopause because estrogen deficiency induces lipid and vascular changes putting healthy blood vessels at risk. Many adverse effects of aging and menopause on lipids are reversed by aerobic exercise. Aerobic exercises such as hiking, swimming, biking, or even ballroom dancing can be beneficial. The activity chosen should be performed 2-3 times a week for 45 minutes to one hour. Research on exercise and cholesterol in menopausal women found that endurance (aerobic) exercises by postmenopausal women may help prevent adverse lipid and lipoprotein changes which might predispose them to coronary artery disease.

Exercise Enhances Mood

Many women experience mood and sleep disturbances related to estrogen deficiency; vasomotor symptoms like hot flashes, night sweats, and joint pain can impair sleep and induce chronic sleep deprivation which can cause mood changes. Vasomotor symptoms are less common among physically active postmenopausal women than

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among sedentary women. Regular exercises can improve cognitive function, enhance mood and promote daytime alertness and nocturnal sleepiness. Exercise can increase endorphin levels which are the bodies' natural pain relievers.

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Many women notice a gain in weight during menopause although their eating habits have not changed. Studies found health promotion sessions with a gynecologist, nutritionist and physical therapist focusing on diet and exercise can increase the general health of post-menopausal females. Aerobic and resistance exercises, as discussed above, can increase energy expenditure and increase lean body mass and are the most effective ways to treat weight gain.

Exercise Improves Incontinence

Some women experience urinary frequency and incontinence during menopause and post menopause. Research starting has shown pelvic muscle exercises (Kegel exercises) decreases urine leakage in women with stress and urge urinary incontinence with overactive bladder frequency. Pelvic muscle exercises that increase support to the urethral sphincter and detrusor (bladder) muscle are taught by a physical therapist to help prevent further symptoms. Specifically, women should "draw in" and "lift up" the perivaginal and rectal/anal sphincter muscles. Once the person is able to identify the muscle, she is

instructed to perform a series of quick flicks or two second contractions followed by sustained (endurance contractions) contractions of five seconds and longer as part of a daily exercises regimen. At least 10 seconds of relaxation is recommended between contractions. Aim for a high level of concentrated effort with each pelvic muscle contraction, as this intensity is associated with improvement in pelvic muscle strength. Pelvic muscle exercises should be done three times daily and performed in three positions—lying, sitting, and standing. A minimum of 50-60 contractions per day is recommended. A gradual increase in number of contractions over a period of practice has been shown to increase muscle strength significantly and decrease urine loss.

The Roll of Physical Therapists

A physical therapist is an exercise professional who can help the post menopausal women with the proper exercise prescription for their needs. The intensity and type of exercise will depend on the fitness of each woman. The activity chosen depends on her interests, comfort and convenience. All women should receive a medical screening from their health professional to be properly evaluated before initiating exercise training, and for a referral to a physical therapist. Women who exercise regularly should work out for 20-60 minutes per session depending on the length of the proper warm up and cool

downs. To maximize strength gains and to minimize the risk of injury, women should do the progressive resistance exercises with instruction and under supervision until she has mastered the techniques. Appropriate stretching exercises should be performed before and after each aerobic and resistance session to improve and maintain flexibility. These are also best performed under supervision until the techniques have been mastered. For most women compliance requires a clear understanding of the benefits that may be gained through regular exercise. Prevention of obesity, osteoporosis, cardiovascular, and adult onset diabetes is a sufficient incentive to keep women exercising, if not to combat the effects of menopause.

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