



How nutrition and exercise can help your heart stay healthy through menopause

By Kathy Abernethy MClSci RN

As this year's theme for World Menopause Day is Cardiovascular Disease, it's a good time to look at how we can look after our heart health, through menopause and beyond. And eating well and staying active are important parts of how we can protect our long-term health.

Why does menopause impact on our heart health?

Falling levels of oestrogen during menopause can make us more prone to certain conditions. As oestrogen plays an important role in protecting our hearts, lowered levels can sometimes lead to circulatory issues, as well as increased cholesterol and blood pressure.

Thankfully, there's plenty that you can do to help keep these issues at bay. Quitting smoking, minimising alcohol and managing stress are all hugely helpful. But here, we're going to look more at the role of nutrition and exercise.

Menopause, heart health and nutrition

Menopause is not a time for faddy diets or quick weight loss that you then equally quickly add back. It's a great time to take stock, to look at your overall diet, and to see if you can build in any better habits. It's important for heart health to stay within a suitable weight for your height, so if you do need to lose weight then look at doing so in a sustainable way. It could be starting with a few swaps for healthier alternatives or reducing your calories by a manageable amount. Making it manageable is really important.

Try to choose wholegrains where you can in terms of bread, pasta and rice, and make sure your daily diet features plenty of fruit and vegetables. These don't have to be fresh – frozen is fine, or even tinned. Aim for at least five portions a day (with a portion being about a fist size).

It can be tempting to think of all fats as 'bad' but we do need some in our diet. Saturated and trans fats can raise cholesterol levels, so these are the ones to cut back on. Where you can, try to include good fats like olive oil, avocado, walnuts, sunflower seeds and oily fish.

It's also a good idea to look at the amount of salt you're consuming, as high levels can also increase the risk of developing high blood pressure.

Healthy eating doesn't mean going hungry. In fact, the opposite applies. Eating the right foods on a regular basis can help keep your blood sugar balanced, which prevents spikes and crashes. Try adding some protein to every meal or snack (fish, eggs, beans, pulses or lean meat) and these will keep you fuller for longer.

Movement, exercise and activity

Regular activity is also important to keep your heart healthy through menopause and beyond. Aim to reach about 150 minutes a week, split into some daily activity. It's good to choose something that gets you slightly out of breath as this will help to lower your risk of heart and cardiovascular disease.

Add in some strength sessions, too, as this will boost your muscle mass (we start losing our lean muscle mass from our 30s onwards). This could be using resistance bands, or even your own body weight. Building up your muscle strength will help you find it easier to do cardio exercises.

If you're not used to exercising regularly, then you might want to start small and build up gradually. But any activity is better than none. Walking can be great for your body and mind, it's free and you can make it social, joining up with friends. Mix it up so you don't get bored, and try to keep an open mind about what you might enjoy.

Yoga can also be beneficial, helping to improve your flexibility and balance, but also serving to help you learn to relax and de-stress (another good way to improve your heart health).

Making some small and relatively simple lifestyle changes now can make a big difference to your long-term health. Focusing on your nutrition, activity and exercise are all great ways to boost your heart health – keeping you in tip-top condition through menopause and beyond.



Kathy Abernethy

MClinSci RN

Founding Clinician and Menopause Specialist