



Menopause and heart health

How do you view menopause? Many women I see as patients regard it as an illness rather than a stage in life. These women often have marked menopausal symptoms, but frequently the medical consultation uncovers other areas of concern. Menopause is a great time to have a health check.

The changes of menopause start up to 8 years before periods cease. The definition of menopause is clumsy - you are through menopause one year after the last period (and this is obviously retrospective).

Many illnesses begin to increase in incidence at menopause and their early detection adds years to a woman's life. Everyone knows about the importance of mammograms, pap smears and osteoporosis, but have you ever thought of an increased risk of diabetes and cholesterol related disease?

Heart health becomes important at menopause. There are a lot of influences on your heart around this time - changes in diet, exercise, personal routines and medications all have their effect as does the way you have treated your body over the previous few decades. Menopause coincides with weight gain in most women, and it will be the easiest time for the rest of their lives to lose that excess.

In fact, weight gain is responsible for exacerbating most menopausal health problems. High blood pressure, unwanted cholesterol and lipid changes and diabetes are all made worse by being overweight. There are many instances of patients reversing these problems by making lifestyle changes that reduce weight.

Good examples of these changes include following a low GI, low fat and lower calorie diet, walking to work or in one's lunch break, taking up an exercise related hobby such as gardening, bowls or tennis and taking advantage of medical advice.

Even if you gain some weight by stopping smoking, you are still better off from a heart point of view.

Weight gain at menopause is more dangerous if it is around the stomach than if it is around the thighs. There is also an increased risk of Type 2 diabetes with this type of weight gain compared to having extra fat in other areas. This is because of the development of insulin resistance, where the insulin loses its effect on the lowering of blood sugar. People who have this more cuddly body type have an inbuilt red flag telling them to do something about heart health in advance.

Medications for conditions diagnosed at menopause have an impact on heart health. For example,

hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is commonly blamed for weight gain, but in reality it is only a minor factor. The unfashionable side of hormone replacement has become more obvious in recent years with the problems of it unmasking and possibly accelerating existing heart disease.

Exercise may become more difficult at menopause. Remember, for weight loss to occur, you have to either cut back on food so you are taking in fewer calories/kilojoules than you need, or you have to increase exercise so that you are using more calories/kilojoules than your diet provides. Usually a compromise is best and increasing exercise and cutting down on the size of your main meal (or having small frequent meals every 2-3 hours) is easiest for most people. You may not feel like exercise whilst going through the changes of menopause - you may feel bloated, unsettled, have frequent or heavy bleeding problems or feel self conscious about hot flushes or your body.

Finally, if menopause is a good time to have a check up, don't forget that men don't have this reminder call so make sure that others of the same age in your life get reminded too!

By Dr Vivienne Miller