



Keeping your heart healthy through menopause and beyond

By Kathy Abernethy MClinSci RN

The theme for this year's World Menopause Day is Cardiovascular Disease. But why do we need to focus on our heart health during menopause? And what can we do to keep our hearts healthy and happy?

As we go through menopause, our oestrogen levels drop, which can impact us in lots of different ways. Oestrogen plays a part in protecting our hearts, by reducing the build up of fatty plaque. Post menopause, as our oestrogen levels have lowered, this can lead to increased risk of circulatory and heart issues. It can also impact on cholesterol levels and blood pressure.

The good news is that there's plenty we can do to keep our hearts healthy, by making some lifestyle adjustments and introducing some healthy habits for long-term wellbeing.

Quitting smoking is one of the best things you can do for your overall health and specifically your heart health. You'll benefit from better circulation to your heart and muscles, which in turn can make physical activity easier. Plus, after one year, your risk of heart attack halves in comparison to a smoker's, and after 15 years this risk will be the same as for someone who has never smoked.

It can be difficult to quit just by going cold turkey, especially if you're a heavy smoker or have been smoking for a long time. But there's plenty of help and support out there. Look for your local [Stop Smoking Service](#) to find out what's in your area.

Cutting back on alcohol can also bring you some big long-term heart benefits. Reducing your intake can lower your risk of stroke and hypertension, as well as reducing your calorie intake so helping with weight management. Try to stick within the government guidelines for weekly units, or speak with your [GP or local alcohol support service](#) if you need some help in cutting back or quitting altogether.

Maintaining a healthy weight for your height is important for protecting your heart. Again, it's about creating some good long-term habits, rather than rushing into an unsustainable diet or quick-fix weight-loss programme. Rather, look at where you can make small changes, swapping sugary snacks and drinks for healthier alternatives and looking at a [realistic weight-loss plan](#) if you do need to shed some pounds.

Getting active will also work wonders for your heart health. Aim for some [daily activity](#) of around 20-30 minutes, with an overall goal of about 150 minutes a week. Anything is better than nothing though! Try to find something you enjoy, as you'll be more likely to stick with it. And remember, just things like parking a little further away from your destination and walking the extra ten minutes can make a difference.

Managing stress levels is important during menopause, as stress can have a big impact on your body. Of course, it can be difficult to avoid stress, so it's about finding ways to manage your body's response to stress. Meditation and mindfulness can be useful tools, and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) has been shown to be highly effective during menopause. If you're struggling then it's important to talk to someone about how you feel. There is a range of [talking therapies and advice](#) you can access for support.

If you're over 40, you're likely to be entitled to a free NHS health check, which can assess your risk of developing coronary heart disease. Regular check ups can help you stay in control, and give you the opportunity to seek expert medical advice over any concerns.

It's also important to note that for women who have experienced menopause under the age of 40, this can impact on heart and bone health. In these cases, HRT is recommended up until the age of at least 50, to protect heart health.

Looking after your heart during menopause and beyond doesn't need to be difficult. In many cases, it's about making tweaks and adjustments to your lifestyle. If you do need some extra support and advice, talk to your GP in the first instance as they can signpost the right resources for you.



Kathy Abernethy

MClinSci RN

Founding Clinician and Menopause Specialist