

Taking menopause to heart

When you're going through menopause, it's not just your hormones that are changing – your heart health can change as well. You may be surprised to know that heart disease is the number-one cause of death for women over 50 years of age. In fact, women are four times more likely to die from heart disease than breast cancer.

The good news is, most forms of heart disease are preventable and menopause is a great time to get proactive about your health. Making heart-healthy changes at midlife can set you up for better health in later life. Best of all, these changes can not only lower your risk of developing other chronic diseases, but can improve your quality of life as well.

The first step

So, where do you start if you're going through menopause and want to reduce your risk of heart disease? Jean Hailes endocrinologist Dr Sonia Davison recommends your first stop should be your GP's office.

"One of the best things you can do during menopause is visit your GP for a check-up," Dr Davison says. "Find out if you are at risk of heart disease by having regular screenings such as blood pressure and cholesterol checks. When you know what your risks are, then you can take positive steps and do something about them."

Take the pressure down

One way to reduce your risk of heart disease is to reduce high blood pressure. High blood pressure, also known as hypertension, is one of the most important risk factors for heart disease and stroke that is both treatable, and for most women, preventable. Research tells us that managing high blood pressure can reduce a woman's risk of stroke by 30-40%, heart attack by 20-25% and heart failure by 50%.

Quitting smoking, exercising regularly, having a healthy weight and changes to your diet can help reduce your blood pressure. Two key dietary elements to carefully monitor are your sodium (salt) intake and your alcohol intake, ensuring you don't consume more than two standard drinks each day, and having two alcohol-free days per week.

Research has also found that a diet called the DASH diet – Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension – is helpful in reducing high blood pressure. The DASH diet is rich in fruit, vegetables and low-fat dairy products. It includes wholegrains, poultry, fish and nuts, and is low in animal fats, red meat, sweets and sugar-loaded drinks such as soft drinks.

The Mediterranean diet is also backed with solid evidence that it can reduce the risk of heart disease and has a similar focus to the DASH diet. There is an emphasis on fruits, vegetables, legumes, wholegrains and olive oil in the Mediterranean diet, with a moderate intake of dairy, seafood and chicken.

As an added bonus, these two diets can also help in the management of high cholesterol levels, which is an important consideration when it comes to reducing your risk of heart disease.

Help for your hormones, help for your heart

Another reason to visit your GP during menopause is to discuss the use of hormone replacement therapy (HRT). Not only is it beneficial for treating the symptoms of menopause, such as hot flushes and vaginal dryness, HRT can also help to prevent heart disease.

There are some risks associated with HRT, so its use depends on your individual circumstances and must be discussed with your doctor. However, if you are less than 60 years old and/or within 10 years of menopause, experts agree that in most healthy women the benefits of HRT outweigh the risks.

The right direction

Menopause is an important stepping-stone in the health and life of women. While it can be a time of looking back on the past, it's important to look ahead and plan for your future as well. When you're at the crossroads of menopause, make sure you take a step in the right direction and take the time to think about not only your hormonal health, but your heart health as well.

Read more about [reducing your risks of heart disease](#), [the Mediterranean diet](#), or learn more about [menopause](#).

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