

How does menopause affect your heart?

So, how does the menopause affect the heart? There are a number of different things that occur. It is known that oestrogen helps to reduce the fatty plaques that can build up in your arteries. In a way, it protects the heart.

But, when your oestrogen starts to fall, it can mean that there is a bigger build-up of fatty plaques in the arteries and this can lead to a variety of symptoms. Falling oestrogen also affects the blood vessels, so your arteries may get less elastic and slightly more static.

This is not good, especially for the big coronary arteries. Every time your heart beats, these big arteries need to expand to take up the pressure that is behind each heartbeat. If your blood vessels lose their elasticity, then this is going to do a number of things.

First, it's going to increase your risk of a heart attack. Your levels of cholesterol can go up, which is really common in the menopause. A lot of women find that their cholesterol starts to rise quite quickly as they go through the menopause.

Falling oestrogen can affect the electrical system of the heart as well. This means that some women experience fluctuations with their heartbeat, similar to palpitations they either miss a beat or get two heartbeats very close together.

Weight gain can be an issue as well and that's going to have an impact. If you're eating the wrong foods, it's going to raise your cholesterol; but, also, putting on too much weight can affect your blood pressure. And, if you also have problems with the arteries expanding, such as the big coronary arteries, then you can end up with high blood pressure as well.

How to keep your heart healthy during menopause

Ways you can keep your heart healthy during the menopause:

Eat well

This is vital – look at your diet. High salt, high sugar, high caffeine and highly saturated fats are all going to be contributory factors to watch out for. If you look at your diet, include more healthy fats – things like fish oils are really good.

If you're vegetarian or vegan, you can look at flaxseed oil. You can look at having loads of vegetables, a little bit of fruit, a good varied diet. Also, look at things like your pulses and healthy grains as well.

Keep your salt to a minimum too – you do need salt, but you also need to stick within the recommended daily allowance which is 6 grams.

If you do like a little bit of salt, go for sea salt. Sea salt is a more comprehensive salt. Table salt is highly processed. White table salt is a bit like white bread, you want to go for the healthier option. In terms of salt, this would be things like sea salt or Himalayan rock salt. These are salts that you can include in your daily diet.

Exercise regularly

This is vital for keeping your heart healthy. There should be a little bit of stress put on the heart when you're exercising; but, if you've not exercised for a long time, and you're in the menopause, get your heart health check first before you jump straight into it.

Start things off really, really slowly to keep things going. A lot of women suffer from joint pain and fatigue in the menopause.

If you're really tired, your joints ache and your get-up-and-go has gone, then it can be very difficult to motivate yourself to exercise. In these situations, it's still important to keep as active as you can, so even a 15 minute walk every day, as brisk as you can manage it, will help to keep your heart healthier than if you were doing nothing but sitting all day.

Manage stress

Again, stress is a huge one for the heart and we know an awful lot of menopausal women end up with stress palpitations which can be as frightening as your hormonal heart palpitations. So, make sure that you get on top of stress.

Smoke less or quit if you can

Try to stop smoking. This is difficult and most people do need a little bit of help, but it's certainly worth it as far as your heart health is concerned, both in the menopause and post-menopause.

Watch your alcohol intake

Limit alcohol as well. This is another known baddie for the heart.

Get your blood pressure and your cholesterol checked regularly

For the majority of women, probably every six months would be absolutely fine. Changes can occur quite quickly in the menopause, so it's better doing it slightly early rather than waiting for a year or every two years. **If you're worried see your Doctor/Practice Nurse**