

REDUCING POSTMENOPAUSAL SYMPTOMS

a holistic approach

As you move into your postmenopausal years, you may find that the ongoing fatigue that plagued you during your peri menopausal stage is now not as noticeable. As the peri menopausal years are left behind, the body adjusts to the level of hormones it now requires. You may experience newfound energy and enthusiasm. Adopting a holistic approach throughout your postmenopausal years will help keep you healthy and well in body, mind and spirit.

In this article we look at ways to manage postmenopausal challenges such as, osteoporosis, pelvic organ prolapse, atrophy of the pelvic floor, stress or urge incontinence and urinary tract infections. We also explore briefly how to keep your joints strong yet supple, creating

more openness and strength in a body that may seem a little stiffer and not as mobile in your yoga practice as it once was.

These issues are not commonly covered in a general yoga class. But by bringing an inclusive openness to these sometimes challenging manifestations of menopause, we enable ourselves to continue to grow and flourish throughout our later years.

PELVIC FLOOR HEALTH

You may be familiar with the saying 'use it or lose it'. This certainly applies to maintaining the integrity of our pelvic floor, the set of muscles that spread across the bottom of the pelvic cavity and act like a hammock. Keeping these muscles working is important, as they support the bladder, vagina, uterus and rectum.

As women, we should be encouraging the health of our pelvic floor right from the onset of puberty. Often this is not a priority because when we are young the pelvic floor feels strong yet supple. However, hormones such as oestrogen and progesterone, required to keep the health of the pelvic floor, decline as we move into menopause. For some

women this may lead to pelvic organ prolapse, stress or urge incontinence and recurrent urinary tract infections (UTIs). These symptoms may not have been as noticeable in peri menopause, but present more commonly as a postmenopausal side effect. Childbirth, hysterectomy or other surgery, obesity and neurological damage may also be a contributing factor to lack of pelvic floor health.

I have had women share with me their feelings of disconnection from their pelvic floor, as they are not sexually active anymore. As the lining of the cervix and vagina thins and also becomes drier, we become more prone to infections and bacteria. Be sure to drink enough water daily to keep hydrated and to flush bacteria out of your system and to keep UTIs at bay.

If UTIs, incontinence and vaginal dryness continue to be an ongoing concern, you may find that a hormone cream used vaginally can help. The hormone cream Estriol is a much less potent type of oestrogen. When used vaginally, the cream is absorbed locally, not throughout the whole body. However, some women

have found it gives them headaches, sore breasts and tingling lips. If that happens, I would suggest reducing the dose, as often much less is needed than is prescribed. This is a personal decision, and many women have told me that, after trying many natural remedies, they were at their wits' end. For these women, Estriol use was the right decision for their quality of life.

Perhaps if we refer instead to 'self-care', rather than self-discipline, we will find it easier to look after ourselves.

So whether you have an active sexual life or not, it stands you in good stead to keep aware of and connected to the ongoing health of your pelvic floor.

DAILY PELVIC FLOOR PRACTICES

Kegel exercises are often prescribed to address pelvic floor symptoms. An easy Kegel exercise is to feel you are stopping yourself from urinating, hold for five seconds and then release. Repeat several times. This is a great exercise to be aware of, but let's look at incorporating Aswini Mudra (Horse Gesture) and Mula Bandha (Root Lock) to maintain strength and suppleness through the pelvic floor.

Aswini Mudra draws up the muscles around the anus and perineum. In Mula Bandha you lift from the base of your pelvic floor up towards your navel. Link these actions with the breath: as you inhale, slowly draw up, as if you were travelling up five floors in an elevator. As you exhale, slowly lower down five floors. If you find the count of five too long, simply decrease to four. There should never be any forcing or straining with the action or with the breath. This way you develop evenly the strength and suppleness of the pelvic floor muscles.

If your mobility permits, I suggest sitting in Virasana (Hero Pose) on a block, at its lowest, to really

feel the lifting action. While these practices explore Aswini Mudra and Mula Bandha at a physical level, as you become familiar with the practices, you may begin to feel the subtle and internal energetic qualities also. I encourage women to not only make this a part of their regular yoga practice, but also to incorporate it throughout daily activities, such as when driving, or waiting in a queue.

URINARY INCONTINENCE

Ah yes, the old 'I need to get to the toilet but I just can't make it' urge, incontinence is the culprit here. You may also have experienced stress incontinence, when a small amount of urine just sneaks out when you sneeze, laugh too hard, jump on a trampoline or jog. It's no laughing matter if this is a regular occurrence. Daily pelvic floor practices to maintain the health of the muscles of the pelvic floor, and yoga postures to strengthen the urethra and bladder, are essential. The key word is daily. Just like brushing your teeth, finding the time for the health of your pelvic floor is essential.

SUPPLEMENTATION AND DIET

You may need to address dietary changes on a daily basis, particularly if your diet is high in foods that are over-processed, or if you consume too much red meat, salt and sugar and over-indulge in alcohol and caffeine.

Now more than ever it is crucial to make sure you are receiving adequate nutrients from the food you eat every day. A balanced diet is one that is full of dark leafy green vegetables, almonds, avocado, tofu, miso, seaweed, salmon, peas, berries, flax oil, freshly squeezed orange juice, alfalfa, freshly ground pepita, flax and sunflower seeds. A diet like this helps your body absorb calcium,

zinc, vitamin K, copper, vitamin C and manganese. I would suggest eating organically and cooking and growing your own if possible.

Remember that a varied whole food diet is essential if you are to receive the full benefit of any supplements you are taking. It is wise to get your vitamin D levels checked if you feel you may be lacking calcium.

As we are taking a holistic approach, our daily routine should also include regular exercise, safe sun exposure, stress management, adequate sleep, limited exposure to chemicals (cleaning products, pesticides, plastics etc) and no smoking. Smoking leaches calcium from our bones, just one of the many reasons to avoid it.

Nutritionist Natalie Harms, who works with me on my day retreats, suggests we should also include sources of food that help balance hormones, such as thyme, turmeric, parsley, onion, garlic, chia seeds and cruciferous vegetables, to name just a few. Your hormones – especially the stress handling glands, the adrenals – will love you for it.

OSTEOPOROSIS AND YOGA

To function properly the body requires calcium. Calcium is the major building block for the bones and so is essential to bone health. But the health of your heart and the strength of your muscles, teeth and gums also rely on the correct amount of calcium in the body.

Bone mass is lost at a greater rate in the 5 to 10 years after menopause. It then stabilises and levels off. The more bone mass you have when you enter menopause, the better off you are. A daily yoga practice that puts your body through its full range of movement and includes both weight bearing, supported and restorative postures may help to lessen the symptoms of osteoporosis. We want to feel that our practice allows the muscles and the mind to relax and

be fully restored. Gentle regular exercise encourages the calcium absorbed by the intestine to be deposited in the bones. Hence, it is wise to not make your practice too strong or depleting. I would suggest that, after a stronger pose, perhaps rest in Balasana (Child Pose). Find the sweet spot in your practice between self-effort and surrender.

Over-exercising can in some cases lead to leaching calcium from the bones. Half an hour of walking daily coupled with practices such as yoga is extremely beneficial for creating and maintaining healthy bones. I would recommend checking with your GP before starting a yoga practice, especially if you have been diagnosed with osteoporosis. Make sure you let your yoga teacher know about your health concerns so your practice can be adjusted if required.

POSTURE

One of the most important things you can do to ward off the side effects of osteoporosis is to maintain good posture. Maintaining an aware and upright posture keeps your bones properly aligned and allows your muscles, joints and ligaments to work as intended, helping to prevent stress fractures.

I am sure you are aware of Tadasana (Mountain Pose). Try to embody the qualities of Tadasana throughout your day, not only on your yoga mat. When standing or sitting, bring your awareness to having an upright spine, one that stays in its natural curves. This helps to encourage the spine to stay healthy and happy. Try also to keep the shoulders broad and your chest open and expanded. Keep your shoulders over your hips and your ears over your shoulders. Feel that your head is balanced symmetrically on your neck.

As your posture improves you may notice that your breathing becomes deeper and your breath moves more freely. You may also notice

that when your breath deepens, your mind becomes clearer. This win-win situation also helps to release stress.

CREATING HEALTHY JOINTS

Lubricating the joints of the body in your yoga practice by moving into and out of each posture helps to circulate the synovial fluid inside your joints. If your body is feeling stiff and slightly achy, this gentle moving into and out of each posture before sustaining the pose helps to free up tight areas. Yoga encourages the joints to be both strong and supple. When we sustain the pose to build strength, we don't want to lock the joints. Become mindful of keeping a sense of lightness and ease throughout your practice.

MAINTAINING YOUR GLANDULAR SYSTEM

A yoga practice that puts the body through its full range of movement is most helpful in bringing balance to the nervous system and replenishment to the glandular system. In the 'uplifting sequence' one posture that has many benefits is Supported Savangasana (Shoulder Stand). One benefit is that as you release the Chin Lock (Jalandhara Bandha), fresh nutrients, and blood are taken to the throat area. This benefits the glands in the throat area – the bow shaped thyroid and parathyroid glands. These glands regulate our energy and metabolism and our body's use of calcium. By creating a yoga practice that addresses the glandular system we support the very important role hormones play in keeping the mind and body functioning optimally.

STRESS MANAGEMENT

If you are continually not managing your stress levels, all the worthwhile endeavours discussed so far will be of very little use. A regular meditation practice will help you to deal with everyday stresses calmly. Incorporating progressive muscle relaxation sequences into

your day is also very beneficial for stress reduction. Progressive muscle relaxation brings balance to the nervous system and replenishment to the glandular system.

REGULARITY

Clearly, there isn't one easy posture to fix everything! Instead, regularity and consistency are the keys, and self-discipline is a must. Perhaps if we refer instead to 'self-care', rather than self-discipline, we will find it easier to look after ourselves. I also bring acupuncture, Ayurveda, naturopathy, homeopathy and massage into my self-care, as do many other women who have participated in my day workshops and retreats.

By exploring these suggestions you may very well not need to take hormone replacement therapy. Do your own research – there is enough information available now for you to make a conscious choice about what feels right for you. Finally, never under-estimate the power of gratitude to keep you on your path. Feeling grateful for all you have brings with it joy, compassion, happiness and peace, allowing you to experience what in yoga we refer to as a sattvic state.

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An Uplifting Sequence

This sequence has been created to bring awareness and health to our bones, joints, pelvic floor, glandular and nervous systems. Weight bearing postures encourage the bones to maintain their density. Moving into and out of poses lubricates the joints. Sustaining the postures builds strength and suppleness. Specific poses throughout the sequence influence the integrity of the pelvic floor. This sequence is especially beneficial for women, but suitable for one and all.



Sit in an easeful cross-legged pose, using a cushion for height under buttocks if needed. Close eyes, settle, and steady the breath, long exhalation and inhalation, through the nostrils. 5 mins



Stand in a wide Tadasana, feet width of hips. Maintaining an aware and upright posture keeps your bones properly aligned, and allows your muscles, joints and ligaments to work as intended, helping to prevent stress fractures. 10 breaths



Place block between thighs, press into the block evenly, don't clench your buttocks or vaginal muscles. Create a smooth and steady breath, soften shoulders away from ears, hold for 10 breaths.



Remove block, place hands in Anjali mudra, fingertips touching and feet together. Bend the knees, sink your sitting bones behind you, and take Utkatasana (Fierce Pose). **4a.** Open arms wide, hold for 5 breaths.



Keep knees deeply bent; exhale as you fold forward into Uttanasana (Standing Forward Fold). Hold for 5 long steady breaths.



Step right foot back and a little out to the right, prep for Warrior 1. Inhale arms overhead, straighten front leg, exhale into lunge, inhale arms back overhead, straighten leg, this is one round, complete x 3 rounds. **6a.** On third flow, take arms out in front, keep back leg active, draw up through pelvic floor, hold for 5 long steady breaths. Repeat opposite side.



Take plank pose, shoulders over wrists, lift up between shoulder blades, draw the belly softly back and up, Hold for 5 to 10 breaths depending on your strength and energy levels. **7a.** Take Half Plank if Full Plank is too strong, build up slowly to Full Plank.



Move into Downward Facing Dog, take feet slightly wider than hips, toes turn in, heels turn out. As you exhale draw the belly back and up, feel the lifting action, through the pelvic floor. Hold for 5 to 10 breaths.



Take a wide stance, come to an upright position. Position blocks to the width of your shoulders. Inhale as you hollow out the spine, lifting the head gently. Hold for 5 steady long breaths.



Feet width of hips, hands beside the body, inhale flow up into Bridge pose, exhale release down, x 3, third round hold for 5 steady breaths. Helps to strengthen the lateral ligaments in the Uterus. **10a.** Flow up into Chakrasana (Wheel Pose), if strength and openness in shoulders and wrists permits, for a weight bearing posture. Hold 5 breaths. **10b.** Hug knees to chest, and gently rock from side to side.



Place block at its widest and lowest, sit in Virasana (Hero Pose), hands on thighs. Inhale draw up through the pelvic floor and perineum to a slow count of five; exhale slowly lower down releasing lifting action to a count of 5. Repeat 5 times. Using Mula Bandha and Ashwini Mudra to encourage strength throughout the pelvic floor, and anal sphincter muscles.



Place a chair on your mat, blanket on seat, bolster on your chair. Straddle seat, hold onto sides of chair, take legs onto backrest, slowly lower yourself down. Shoulders supported by bolster, hands lower down to reach for back legs of chair, Hold 5 to 10 breaths. **12a.** Move back of pelvis towards edge of seat, take legs one at a time skyward, Hold for 5 to 10 breaths. When exiting, release hands and slide backwards off chair. Not to be practised if menstruating, or have spinal issues. Rest in Shavasana (Corpse Pose), deeply relaxing, all through the body and the mind. Hold for 5 to 10 mins.