

Walk away menopausal anxiety, stress and depression

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Study finds exercise reduces mid-life mental health symptoms

With more menopausal women seeking natural therapies to ease symptoms, a new study has found that simply adding a brisk walking routine can reduce a variety of psychological symptoms such as anxiety, stress and depression. The research is published in the January issue of *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*.

“With the aging population, physical activity represents one way for women to stay mentally healthy. Physical activity can help throughout the menopausal transition and afterwards,” said Temple University public health researcher Deborah Nelson, Ph.D, the study’s lead author.

From 1996 to 1997, 380 women living in Philadelphia were recruited and they have been followed for more than eight years. The women reported their physical activity level and menopausal symptoms including stress, anxiety, depression and hot flashes.

The average age at the beginning of the study was 42 –years –old; 49 percent were African American, 58 percent reported more than a high school education, and 38 percent smoked cigarettes.

“We recruited African-American and Caucasian women living in Philadelphia for this study to better represent the large population of urban women. These results can be generalizable to both urban Caucasian and African-American women, groups of women that have been under-represented in previous studies,” Nelson said.

In the category of stress, researchers found that high levels of physical activity were the most beneficial to postmenopausal women and African-American women. They reported lower levels of perceived stress than those who did not exercise. This top-tier group walked at a moderate pace (4 miles per hour) for an hour and a half at least five times a week.

While the study found mental benefits of exercise, it did not show that exercise reduced physical symptoms such as hot flashes.

“Physical symptoms like hot flashes will go away when you reach menopause, but mental health is something women still need to think about post-menopause,” Nelson said.

The middle tier walked five times a week for 40 minutes. The bottom group — considered the non-exercisers — walked for 15 minutes about five times a week.

By design, all of the women were pre-menopausal at baseline. Eight years after enrollment, 20 percent of the women were menopausal with an additional 18 percent classified in the late transitional phase.

“In the urban setting, these women walked outside on city blocks or in shopping malls. Groups could organize to take walks after dinner. It didn’t require going to the gym,” Nelson said. “You don’t have to run 20 miles a week to reap the benefits of exercise. If you stick to a moderate-paced walking schedule, it can keep your body mass index down and lower the risk of stress, anxiety and depression,” she added.

Source: Temple University

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