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What's the link between menopause and cholesterol?

After the menopause, you're at higher risk of heart (cardiovascular) disease, and it's the leading cause of death for women. Your cholesterol levels play an important role here, and this is why it's important to attend your NHS Health Checks.

Menopause and its challenges

Every woman will go through [menopause](#) if she lives long enough. On average, women go through the menopause at the age of around 51. It's a natural stage in life but it doesn't happen overnight.

Officially, you've reached the menopause when your periods have stopped for 12 months. You stop having periods because the levels of your female hormone, oestrogen, have dropped. But before that comes a time called the [perimenopause](#), when your hormone levels are going up and down. This period lasts close to 5 years for most women, and brings with it many of the symptoms of the menopause.

When you think about the symptoms of the menopause, you probably think of hot flushes and night sweats. And you'd be right. Around 4 in 5 women get some symptoms around the menopause, and these are the most common.

Usually hot flushes, like night sweats, settle down eventually – although if you get them, they go on for an average of 7 years after your periods stop. But the menopause can also lead to a host of other issues:

- Brain fog.
- Tiredness.

- Joint and muscle pains.
- Memory issues.
- Mood changes.
- Thinning hair.
- Dry skin.

Menopause and cholesterol

As a nation, we're gradually beginning to recognise more of the impact the menopause can have on health. However, very few women seem to be aware of the link between menopause and [cholesterol](#).

After the menopause, you're at higher risk of [cardiovascular disease](#) and it's the leading cause of death for women. Cholesterol is one of the major risk factors for [heart attack](#) and [stroke](#). Oestrogen works on your liver to keep cholesterol levels stable - and going through the menopause is often linked to an increase in 'bad' cholesterol.

A 2023 national survey of UK adults aged 55 and over, commissioned by Novartis, showed that less than 1 in 10 respondents were aware that menopause could lead to high levels of bad cholesterol. 1 in 9 said they didn't know what conditions high cholesterol can lead to¹.

All this is a concern, because you won't know your cholesterol is high unless you have it checked. In fact, 3 in 4 women aged 55 and over in the survey were unable to identify that high cholesterol doesn't cause symptoms.

NHS Health Checks

If you are aged 40-74, you're eligible for a free NHS Health Check every 5 years. If you've been diagnosed with high cholesterol, [heart disease](#), stroke, [high blood pressure](#), raised cholesterol, [kidney disease](#) or [diabetes](#), you're not eligible because your GP should be checking your health regularly. Only 1 in 12 women over 55 in the survey had ever had a 10-year/lifetime CVD risk assessment to see how high their risk of stroke or heart attack is.

NHS Health Checks are available at GP practices and many pharmacists. At this check, your healthcare professional will ask you some questions about your family history and your lifestyle. They'll check your weight and blood pressure and carry out a blood test. If you're over 65, you'll also be advised about the signs and symptoms of [dementia](#) and what to do if you think you have them.

Making lifestyle changes

Once you've had the test, your healthcare professional will offer you personalised advice to help you avoid health problems in the future. This often relates to changes you could make to your diet, advice on exercise, or losing weight if you're overweight. For more information on cholesterol, head to [Get Back In The Game](#).

We all know how important exercise is for your heart. But it can be really easy to let exercise slip if you're busy, have joint stiffness, or other medical problems that make it harder.

National guidelines from doctors recommend that you should aim for half an hour, five days a week, of aerobic exercise – the sort that makes your heart beat a bit faster and leaves you mildly out of puff. Ideally, you should also do some [strengthening exercises](#) to work individual muscle groups – like your legs, hips, arms, shoulders, chest and back – a couple of times a week too.

Nearly half of the women aged 55 and over in the survey say they don't manage to do this much exercise, and 2 in 5 say it's because they've lost interest in any exercise they were doing¹. However, women were more likely than men to reconsider if they had company, with 2 in 5 saying having a friend to take part with them would make them more likely to get exercising again.

Regular exercise can also help cut your risk of [osteoporosis](#), or thinning of the bones, which can cause 1 in 2 women over 50 to break a bone. Weight-bearing exercise strengthens your bones. That includes running, brisk walking, dancing, aerobics and strengthening exercises – in fact, pretty much any exercise other than swimming or cycling.

Your bones are constantly being reabsorbed and rebuilt by your body, and the stress on your bones of weight-bearing exercise kicks your bone-forming cells into action. You also need enough [calcium](#) in your diet to keep your bones strong.

With thanks to My Weekly magazine, where this article was originally published.

Further reading

1. [Novartis: Cardiovascular disease experts discuss link between menopause and CVD risk.](#)

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