

How Can Hormone Balancing Exercise Support Women in Menopause?

Debra Atkinson, MS, CSCS



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Rebekah Kelley: Welcome to the Humanized podcast, all about personalizing your health. I'm your host, Rebekah Kelley, and today we'll be discussing How Can Hormone Balancing Exercise Support Women in Menopause, with Debra Atkinson. Before I introduce Debra Atkinson, I want to remind everyone to subscribe and get all of our variety of casts in audio, video and transcription at HumanizedHealth.com. I'd also like to thank our lead sponsor, Village Green Apothecary, at MyVillageGreen.com.

A little bit about Debra. She's a wellness coach, hormone balancing fitness expert, best-selling author, podcast host, frequent speaker, TEDx presenter, and founder of Flipping 50. She is passionate about helping women "flip" their second half with the vitality and energy that they want.

Thank you so much for being with us, Debra.

Debra Atkinson: Thank you for having me.

Rebekah Kelley: It's a complete pleasure and I'm really excited to talk about this. So I just want to go ahead and say, women in menopause, a lot of my friends, complain about weight gain, belly fat. They say, look, I'm exercising, I'm doing all the right things. What's going on? Debra, can you break down, and just let us know, what are the mistakes that we're making?

Debra Atkinson: Well, the biggest mistakes are the way we tend to exercise. So we tend to, number one, do something I believe would be labeled as insanity. We've got something already we're doing, it's not working and we decide, I'm going to do that more, I'm going to do it longer, I'm going to do it more frequently. And that's probably the wrong approach. So we should be getting the right support, right idea. We're feeling better. We've got more energy. We're sleeping better. Even if the scale isn't changing and that's our goal, we should have hints, some breadcrumbs, that we're on the right path.

Here's what women tend to do. We've been conditioned. Right now, women still, who were in menopause and/or beyond, have been conditioned for decades that endurance and cardio exercise of any kind – high intensity, moderate intensity, low intensity – is the best way to burn more calories, which we equate with burning more fat.

However. In midlife, that all backfires because we don't have those hormones there to help us. Estrogen isn't there, we've got lower testosterone. They don't help us get the muscle. So what we need is to get the muscle. We need to spend more time in the strength training room and drop those fears that we're going to bulk up, right? And a lot of women still have that fear. I'm loving the fact that I see 20- and 30-somethings in the weight room now, females, more than ever. And I love that. But the gap still occurs in women in their later 30s and 40s and 50s and beyond because we're new to it. We're intimidated by it. If that's the first time you stepped into a gym, it doesn't matter if you're a CEO of your life everywhere else. If you step here and you're

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intimidated, it's still a first time. So we need to shift that. Less endurance exercise, more strength training exercise.

And the reason is, less endurance because endurance exercise will spike cortisol. After about an hour, definitely 75 minutes, we see cortisol continue to go up and it doesn't have a corresponding down. It just stays up, which means you're storing fat. We need to switch that time and do strength training so we can gain the lean muscle tissue that boosts metabolism. And strength training tends not to have that sharp spike for cortisol. So it's actually a way to feel more powerful inside and outside and get the results you want.

The last one came up this past year during the pandemic. So, what women had been told also, this is a hangover from actually the late '80s – moderate exercise. You know, you've heard, all things in moderation. Including our exercise. That has been replaced by science so many times, but we still default to that old dogma. And unfortunately doctors still will give that advice if they themselves are not more schooled or regular exercisers themselves. They're still saying moderate exercise, because it's a safe answer to give their clients and not get too specific. But here's the real way we turn that around and make it true. We need moderate amounts of all kinds of intensity of exercise. We need moderate amounts of low intensity and really high intensity. We need to get breathless.

Rebekah Kelley: I love that. How much does timing of exercise matter? I mean, obviously, the best time to exercise is going to be when you're going to do it, but does timing make a difference? Is there actually a better time to go do some exercise?

Debra Atkinson: Yeah. Love you, but I'm going to argue with you. [Both laugh] So, here's what we do know. In menopause, midlife, it changes. And it may actually be opposite that. The best time to exercise is dependent on the type of exercise you're going to do. So, one of the mantras at Flipping 50 is, "Intense early, light late." To remember that little alliteration. But here's why. You want to work with your hormones, not against them. So, cortisol naturally, if it's working correctly – and that's not true for everybody – is highest in the morning at 8:00 am. That should be what, if you could not get up to that alarm clock, if you could wake up naturally, it would be cortisol that's waking you up. Most of us will probably agree we're more productive, we're better thinkers, we do the creative stuff early in the day because... we can get things done in the afternoon, but we may not have that creativity. We just don't have that kind of focus the way we did earlier. That's thank you to cortisol. So it's a good guy as well as a bad one. But we want to exercise when our cortisol is high because it's also our energy hormone. And the reason is, if you exercise late day, say you get off at 5:00 and you do that high-intensity workout that was scheduled, and you do it at 5:30 pm, your body is already low on cortisol. You're preparing for relaxing and calmly getting yourself ready to sleep, which is as it should be. But what you do is stir the pot and your body doesn't have cortisol for energy, so it says, well wait, I'll convert this other hormone called pregnenolone into cortisol. So now you've got energy and you'll finish and say, Debra, don't know what you're talking about. Did my workout just fine. It was great. But 4 hours later, when you're ready to wind down and go to sleep, pregnenolone's job is

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to help you calm down and do that. But you've already written checks on that account and you may not sleep well. And that will come back to bite you, you know where.

Rebekah Kelley: Well, and I love to sleep and I know most of my friends do too, and it's a little bit of a challenge sometimes, so, got it. Okay. Calmer in the evening.

You've also hinted at some guidelines you use with your Flipping 50 community. Would you share some of those tenets with us, help make us smart about what we should be doing?

Debra Atkinson: Yeah. Well, absolutely. So tenets, or the 10 commandments, however you like to think about them. Okay. So number one, and number one on purpose is, "Restore before more." We are all more likely, if we feel like we're gaining weight, we can't lose the weight or we're getting into belly fat or cellulite, we're more likely to try to do more, even though we're exhausted. And that exhaustion is telling you that your adrenal system may not be working ideally, your cortisol is amped or imbalanced, and we're not going to make it better by doing more and adding more exhaustion to it.

So you've got... you're driving down an interstate and there's road construction. There's no shoulder and you can't pass. You've got to get through it. Go slow first, and then you can go faster. Right? So the same is true with exercise. You're going to get better results if you rest up, restore, take care of them.

Number two is, "Intense early, light late." We've talked about that. So interval early. Do your yoga, go for a walk later and that will not put you a workout behind, necessarily. It will potentially remove the obstacle to you getting the results you want.

"Sleep deep." So doing those first two will help that, but you've also got to prioritize it. So sometimes for women it's, we can "one more thing" ourselves right out of an hour or two of sleep, right? So we've got to really say, oh no, this is really important. And I don't need to finish this show. I actually need to just go to bed.

The next one is, "Rest best," and that's tied into sleep, but rest between workouts. When we're over 40, definitely over 50, more of us, at least you compared to you, me compared to younger me, we need more rest between the exercise to benefit from it. It doesn't mean we can't work out just as hard as we want to. In fact, we need intensity more than we ever did when we were younger, but we need to take more recovery. So, 72 hours between strength, instead of 48, is actually a better rule of thumb.

And then, "Go pro." So this is a controversy with some people I know, but we need more protein. We need adequate amino acids. They are the building blocks of muscle. And when we look at osteoporosis, we also see frailty as a problem because frailty leads to falls, which leads to the fractured bones. Frailty happens from a loss of muscle mass. We need to keep that

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muscle mass. The protein is necessary in order to help the strength training. Get the benefits that you actually deserve from it.

The next one is, "Breathless." So, interval training, we've talked a little bit about. Definitely, you need to get breathless more than you just need to go for another walk around the block. Life sometimes is an interval train. But we need to literally reach breathlessness. So it doesn't have to be complicated. You can walk up a steep hill and do that. You can get on an exercise bike, you can do it in a swimming pool. So many ways to turn any exercise into interval training. And it's a few minutes, not very long.

The next one is, "Reach fatigue." So when you're strength training, number one, put down the pink dumbbells and nobody gets hurt. You need to pick up something heavy. But you need to reach muscular fatigue. That's very different than just being tired at the end of a workout. Muscular fatigue in every set, whether you're doing two repetitions, 10 repetitions or 20 repetitions. That helps your muscles.

"Stress less." So whether it's emotional stressors, your finances... You know, we couldn't remove a pandemic, but we hopefully could remove some of the other things that are bothering us and/or we find joy. Find joy, find laughter, find ways to offset it, and then eat more and exercise less. That's just an easy statement and it is the opposite of the dogma. So I'm going to repeat it. Eat more of the right things, exercise less. Just make it quality when you do it.

And the last one is, "Choose joy over calories." If I had a dollar for every time as a fitness instructor I had been asked, how many calories did I just burn in this class? Right? You know, that kind of exercise typically doesn't stick. We need to choose, I love this, that's why I keep continuing to do it.

Rebekah Kelley: Wow, I love that. Thanks, Debra. Those are really valuable insights. Debra Atkinson can be found at www.DebraAtkinson.com. I'm going to spell that. D E B R A A T K I N S O N.com. Let me remind you to subscribe and get access to all Humanized videos, podcasts and transcriptions from all of our thought leaders on personalized health at HumanizedHealth.com. Thanks so much for being with us. That's all great information.

Debra Atkinson: Thank you so much for having me.