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Exercise reduces menopausal symptoms and improves quality of life

Regular exercise can reduce severe symptoms in menopausal women and improve their quality of life, according to a study in the latest Journal of Advanced Nursing.

Researchers from the University of Granada in Spain found that the number of women suffering severe symptoms fell by a quarter after they took part in a 12-month supervised exercise programme, while problems increased among women who didn't exercise.

Fifty per cent of the 24-strong exercise group had severe symptoms at the start of the programme compared with 37 per cent at the end. 58 per cent of the 24 women in the non-exercise group reported problems at the start of the study and this rose to 67 per cent over the same period.

"The group that improved took part in three hours of fully supervised exercise a week for 12 months" explains lead researcher Professor Carmen Villaverde-Gutierrez. "This comprised cardio respiratory, stretching, muscle-strengthening and relaxation exercises.

"As well as monitoring severe symptoms, we also looked at the women's quality of life and found that the average scores for the exercise group improved while those for the control group decreased."

For example, at the start of the study the exercise group averaged 2.80 on a specialist social well-being scale and the control group average 2.86. By the end of the study the exercise group has risen to 2.91 but the control group had fallen considerably to 2.16.

The exercise group also increased their average scores on scales measuring physical and psychological functioning and positive state of mind, with the control group showing reduced averages.

Women taking part in the study were recruited from a health centre near Grenada following a thorough health assessment by both a doctor and nurse. The 48 women, who had an average age of just over 60, were randomly assigned to the exercise and control groups.

73 per cent had started their menopause naturally, rather than after surgery, and 60 per cent had been going through it for more than 10 years. None of them exercised and 76 per cent were classified as overweight or obese according to their Body Mass Index.

Before each twice-weekly session the exercise group were assessed by the physiotherapist leading the programme and a nurse. The women's mobility, flexibility, balance, co-ordination were checked, together with elements such as cardio respiratory strength.

The control group did not exercise but they did attend monthly meetings where their blood pressure and general health was checked to ensure that no medical issues had developed that could affect the final results.

All the women completed the study and the average attendance at meetings and exercise sessions was 90 per cent.

"Joining the regular exercise programme improved the women's health and also gave them the chance to join a sociable group activity and reduce feelings of loneliness" says

Professor Villaverde-Gutierrez.

"Our findings suggest that regular exercise programmes can help to alleviate some of the physical symptoms associated with the menopause and improve women's health and quality of life.

"We would like to see exercise programmes offered as an integral part of primary healthcare for menopausal women. At the very least, women going through the menopause should be encouraged to join a local exercise group suitable for their age and health so that they can share the benefits experienced by the women in our study."

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Notes to editors

- I Quality of life of rural menopausal women in response to a customized exercise programme. Villaverde-Gutierrez et al, University of Grenada, Spain. Journal of Advanced Nursing. Volume 54.1, pages 11-19. (March 2006).
- I Journal of Advanced Nursing, which is celebrating its 30th anniversary in 2006, is read by experienced nurses, midwives, health visitors and advanced nursing students in over 80 countries. It informs, educates, explores, debates and challenges the foundations of nursing health care knowledge and practice worldwide. Edited by Professor Alison Tierney, it is published 24 times a year by Blackwell Publishing Ltd, part of the international Blackwell Publishing group.
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