

MY LIFE IN HEALTH

'I DON'T WANT WOMEN TO FEEL TERRIFIED OF PERIMENOPAUSE'

Olympian Jess Ennis-Hill, 37, speaks to Joanna Ebsworth about how she's changed the way she approaches exercise, and how she's helping women navigate perimenopause.

I never used to think about menopause because it seemed so far away, and I just didn't want to know. I'd not fully understood about perimenopause, which is that pre-phase before you get into menopause. The development of the perimenopause programme in my Jennis app came from listening to our customers saying, "we're heading into this new phase where our cycles are changing massively, and we don't have those distinctive four phases. How can you cater for us?" And that's

why we created a product to serve those women.

When you hit puberty, your hormones increase rapidly and erratically so you have all these hormonal changes and mood swings. But perimenopause is the decrease of those hormones in an erratic and often rapid way. Hearing about it from the women we've spoken to who are going through perimenopause makes me realise that it can be challenging and scary

if you don't know what's going on. So, the whole thing with understanding your hormones and being able to track them is that you start to notice changes and symptoms, and the way you're feeling on a day-to-day basis, and you can pick up that you're going into this phase – or if you're in it – and start to address what to do next.

Although I haven't experienced any perimenopause symptoms yet, I feel much better prepared now. That's thanks to the research we did

PHOTOS: JOANNA EBSWORTH; HAIR: MAGEE; JEWELLERY: JESSICA ENNIS-HILL; MAKEUP: HILLARY; STYLING: JESSICA ENNIS-HILL; IMAGE: JENNIS MAGGERS



for the app and I've learnt so much over the past few years. It's made me realise that more women would feel so much more confident and prepared for these life phases if they just had those key bits of information and advice on what to do. I don't want women to feel terrified about loads of awful symptoms they might get; it's more about recognising that your hormones are changing but there are ways you can help yourself feel better.

A lot of women have said they train or exercise in the same way they did in their 20s and 30s. So, if they're a keen runner, they'll just keep on running, or if they're into cycling, they'll keep cycling because that's what's worked for them in the past. But when you go into perimenopause and then menopause, that style of cardio exercise – where you're stressing your body and increasing your cortisol – can be quite damaging. Being able to do more strength training during this period is key in preventing injury as well as maintaining bone density.

We experience a big drop in oestrogen during perimenopause. This can lead to a big increase in fat storage, as well as a decline in muscle mass, and that decline means your metabolism slows down so you don't burn fat as much as you previously would have. But if you can maintain some level of muscle mass and keep your strength work going into later life, it will put you in a much stronger position – literally!

One thing I've heard a lot of women say is that they're prescribed antidepressants during perimenopause and menopause. They go to their doctor and they're not sure what's wrong with them. I imagine it's quite a terrifying feeling to think, "Argh, what's happening? Am I depressed?", when in fact there's a real, clear explanation a lot of the time as to why they're feeling that way – which is because of changing hormones. And this is something we all go through as women. But to



'Perimenopause can be challenging and scary if you don't know what's going on.'

just understand it better can make a huge difference.

The perimenopause programme of the app covers fitness, stress-release strategies, relaxation and nutritional advice as well. You can go in and select symptoms you're experiencing, so if you're feeling bloated or anxious, there are breathwork or yoga techniques and other exercises to do to help relieve symptoms. If you do the right type of exercise at the right time, it can make a massive difference. I'm obviously hugely biased when it comes to exercise, but we all know how amazing you feel when you've done something physical. You get that endorphin rush and it makes you feel so much more positive. The programme just provides clever ways of being able to move your body in the right way for you, so as to make a massive difference to your mood and energy levels.

My motivation to train is the same as it's always been but the emphasis has changed. I'm obviously not now working towards a goal all the time, and there's no clear structure to how I exercise or train – it's more about how I feel. But I've always had that sense that I want to exercise, and I love the feeling it gives me. My attitude is probably more relaxed now in terms of going with how I feel as opposed to thinking, "I must do these sessions during this time frame", which is what I used to have to do.

I don't believe in cutting out any food groups or being restrictive with calories. I don't calorie count or anything like that and never have. But I do believe in having a really balanced diet. I try to eat as much healthy food as possible and try to have around three plant-based meals a week to balance things out. I just try to be aware of what I'm eating and my



'It's about recognising that your hormones are changing.'



portion sizes, as opposed to being restrictive or dieting in any way.

Food is still about fuelling my body but not as much as in my athlete days. Back then I was training two or three times a day, so fuelling my body was key or I wouldn't have been able to do the sessions. Now, I'm just aware of what I need to eat after I've done a workout and I make sure I've got enough on board before I start. It's about sensible fuelling as opposed to maintaining a strict regime like I did in the past.

As an athlete, I would push myself hard all the time, but I've changed the way I exercise. Every session had to be hard in the past but now I realise that while it's great to push myself at certain times, I know that at other times in my cycle, a yoga session, steady Pilates session, or a long, slow run will suit me better. Oh, and rest is so important! Rest is something I've always been on board with. You must let your body rest from what you've done. There's no point in pushing yourself hard every day because your body needs to recover. Maintaining balance with the way you exercise is important.

As I've got older, I've started to spend more time on my skin. When I was in my 20s, although I'd never fall asleep with make-up on, I'd only wash with a quick splash of water whereas now, I wash it off properly. I cleanse well and then put on a few more products and creams these days. For me, I think the biggest thing is to stay hydrated throughout the day, take a bit of extra vitamin C and vitamin D, and be diligent with my skincare routine before bed and first thing in the morning. I also take probiotics to make sure my gut health is in a good place. Hopefully it shows!

Jennis Perimenopause is now available through the Jennis hormone intelligence app; £9.99 per month, jennis.com.

