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Why getting outdoors can support you through menopause



Why getting outdoors can support you through menopause

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Spring is here, and we're seeing more of the sun. From eating lunch outside to pottering in the garden, this is something we should all be embracing when we can. But if you're going through menopause, there's even more reason to celebrate sunny days – here's why.

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Benefits of being outdoors during menopause

1. Improves mood swings, depression, and anxiety

There is nothing like feeling the sun on your skin when you're feeling low or stressed. If you are menopausal, there's even more reason to make this a habit.

Perhaps you've found yourself feeling more irritable, low, tearful, or anxious? You're not alone. Changes in mood are a common feature of perimenopause and **menopause**, affecting around one half of women¹.

This happens because the same hormones that control your menstrual cycle, oestrogen and progesterone, also influence your serotonin and cortisol levels. As oestrogen decreases during menopause, levels of serotonin² – the happy hormone – also go down, while stress hormone cortisol levels may go up³. Getting outdoors can help rebalance these hormones. This works in several ways:

- Sunlight triggers serotonin production in your body⁴ lifting your mood straightaway.
- If you're walking or exercising in some way, even better – physical activity releases brain chemicals called endorphins, which help ease discomfort and boost your mood.

Live in a city? Take a weekend trip to your nearest natural beauty spot. Work lunch break? Eat in a park if possible. A natural outdoor setting is an even more joyful, relaxing and sensory experience – trees, plants, and birdsong can make us feel happier and reduce stress⁵, and being outdoors in nature lowers cortisol more than being outdoors in a city⁶.

2. Helps you to sleep better at night

A broken night's sleep is often part of menopause, sometimes caused by uncomfortable hot flashes. But going for a walk outside at the start of the day can improve how well you sleep that night.

This is because natural daylight influences your levels of melatonin – the hormone which regulates your body clock. By exposing yourself to sunlight in the morning, you cause your night time melatonin levels to rise sooner, helping you fall asleep more easily.

Alongside its benefits for menopause related insomnia, bright morning light is proven to be effective against premenstrual syndrome (PMS) and **seasonal affective disorder (SAD)**. Melatonin also plays an important role in fighting infection, auto-immune problems, inflammation, and even cancer⁷.

Not only energising and refreshing, a good night's sleep also supports you through menopause by maintaining a healthy hormone balance. Many of your sex hormones are released and regulated during sleep – including progesterone, cortisol, and HGH (human growth hormone).

Tip: Aim to get at least 15–30 minutes of time outdoors in the morning, and then again between 1–3pm when your melatonin levels get another brief peak.

3. Protects against osteoporosis

Menopause also leads to **bone loss**. The oestrogen hormone helps build bone mass, so lower levels during and after menopause leave your bones more vulnerable to fractures caused by osteoporosis. In fact, it's thought that at least 1 in 3 women over age 50 will experience these fractures⁸.

The good news is that getting plenty of vitamin D could help counter this effect, maintaining strength in your bones. As you can't get enough vitamin D from the food you eat, the most important source is natural sunlight. When the sun hits your skin, your body produces a form of vitamin D that promotes healthy bones.

In places like the UK where we have limited exposure to the sun in winter, it's also recommended that everyone take a daily **vitamin D supplement**. Combining natural sunlight with a 10 micrograms (400 units) daily supplement is best⁹.

The mental health benefits of the outdoors – and nature in particular – may also help your bones. Both long-term stress and depression interrupt certain hormones important for bone health, which is thought to be caused by high cortisol levels¹⁰.

Don't forget the sunscreen

Like all things in life, there's a balance to be struck. Too much UV radiation from the sun can be harmful for anyone, but after menopause, how this affects your hormones may contribute to several health issues¹¹.

According to clinical scientist Kai Triebner, this includes cardiac diseases and neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's. But we definitely need sunlight to stay healthy, so what does a good balance look like?

The scientist concludes that, as a general rule of thumb, exposing your face and lower arms to 10–15 minutes of sun a day is about right. If you're staying out for longer on a clear day, put on sun cream and try to cover up, regardless of how easily you sunburn.

Further reading

1. Huang et al: Anxiety disorder in menopausal women and the intervention efficacy of mindfulness-based stress reduction.
2. Barth et al: Sex hormones affect neurotransmitters and shape the adult female brain during hormonal transition periods.
3. Cortisol levels during the menopausal transition and early Postmenopause: observations from the Seattle Midlife Women's Health Study.
4. Azmitia: Chapter 1 – Evolution of serotonin: sunlight to suicide.
5. Mechelli et al: Study suggests exposure to trees, the sky and birdsong in cities beneficial for mental wellbeing.
6. Sudimac et al: How nature nurtures: Amygdala activity decreases as the result of a one-hour walk in nature.
7. Mead: Benefits of sunlight: a bright spot for human health.
8. Agostini et al: Muscle and bone health in postmenopausal women: role of protein and vitamin D supplementation combined with exercise training.
9. Watchararon et al: Effects of sunlight exposure and vitamin D supplementation on vitamin D levels in postmenopausal women in rural Thailand: A randomized controlled trial.
10. Suarez-Bregua et al: Stress, glucocorticoids and bone: a review from mammals and fish.

11. Triebner et al: Ultraviolet radiation as a predictor of sex hormone levels in postmenopausal women: A European multi-center study (ECRHS).

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