

# EVERYTHING CHANGES

**M**enopause, a natural biological process that marks the end of a woman's menstrual cycles, is often surrounded by stigma and misunderstanding. While it's a universal phase in most women's lives, its impact can be particularly challenging for those engaged in physically demanding activities such as equestrian sports. A growing body of research, including studies led by Stephanie Bradley at the University of Gloucester, is shedding light on the challenges menopausal women face while riding and competing. Her findings highlight not only the physical effects of menopause but also the emotional and psychological toll it takes on women's confidence and ability to perform.

## Beyond the physical

Menopause brings a range of physical and mental health changes, many of which are particularly problematic for women in active sports. Hot flushes, night sweats, joint pain, fatigue and sleep disturbances are some of the most common symptoms, and they can interfere with daily life.

According to Bradley's research, more than 50% of menopausal women involved in equestrian sports reported that symptoms such as fatigue and joint pain had a direct impact on their ability to train, compete or even enjoy riding. Fatigue, one of the most common complaints, can leave women feeling drained and reluctant to engage in physical activity. Joint pain, often exacerbated by the hormonal fluctuations that occur during menopause, makes it

*Kate Wensley looks at how, with increased awareness, we can better support riders going through the menopause*

harder to maintain the flexibility and physical strength needed for riding.

In addition to these physical symptoms, the hormonal changes associated with menopause also affect a woman's mental health. Bradley's research points out that mood swings, anxiety and 'brain fog' are common during menopause. Women often report feelings of irritability or even sadness, which can undermine the positive mindset needed to stay confident in the saddle.

For equestrians, the combination of physical discomfort and mental fatigue can create a feedback loop, in addition, a reduction of oestrogen is the driver that can strongly impact confidence levels – it isn't reduced solely as a result of pain and fatigue.

The more women struggle with these symptoms, the less confident they become in their abilities. This diminished confidence can make them feel even more vulnerable to the risks associated with horse riding, where focus, quick reflexes and emotional balance are critical. "I was coaching clients who were struggling with

their position, getting breathless with anxiety, in discomfort with hips, knees, shoulders or were simply scared."

## Confidence is key

Over 40% of women who were surveyed reported a decline in their confidence as a result of menopausal symptoms. This loss can be particularly difficult for experienced riders who've spent years honing their skills. Suddenly facing physical discomfort and mental challenges, many women reported feeling 'unprepared' or 'less competent', even when they'd previously been successful riders.

Stephanie shares her own live experience, "I had sudden irrational fear of riding my horse Des (who has since been a Para Horse as he's so safe!) plus I suffered severe musculoskeletal pain resulting in months of ineffective physiotherapy and an MRI suggesting hip replacement being the only solution. This combined with me experiencing hot flushes and going on HRT, and suddenly the pain reduced so much that