

HEARTFELT Ageing



Menopause's role in women's heart health

Menopause marks a significant chapter in a woman's life—a time of transition and transformation. While this natural biological process entails well-known changes such as hot flashes and mood swings, its impact goes beyond the surface.

To delve into the dynamic interplay between menopause and heart health, **Dr. Emily Tan**, Senior Consultant Cardiologist and Clinical Director of



Women's Clinic from IJN is here to uncover the mechanisms at play, offering insights to empower women in safeguarding their cardiovascular wellness during this crucial life stage.

MENOPAUSE IS ASSOCIATED WITH AN INCREASED RISK OF HEART DISEASE. COULD YOU ELABORATE FURTHER?

Dr. Emily:

Menopause is an inevitable part of every woman's life journey which presides about a third of a woman's

lifespan. This is a time of change due to declining levels of estrogen, a feminine hormone responsible for many of a woman's bodily functions such as reproductive and bone health. During this period of menopause, there are adverse changes in cholesterol levels, blood pressure, body fat distribution, and blood vessel health that contribute towards a higher risk of heart disease in women beyond the effects of ageing alone. In addition, there can be associated sleep disturbances and anxiety or depression during this period with a negative impact on heart health.

HOW DO SYMPTOMS OF MENOPAUSE IMPACT HEART HEALTH AND WHAT EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES ARE AVAILABLE TO WOMEN?

Dr. Emily:

Menopausal symptoms such as hot flashes, sleep disturbances, anxiety, or depression often can be managed with lifestyle modification which also helps to maintain good heart health. Adoption of healthy lifestyle measures such as exercise, consuming a healthy diet, and refraining from smoking

can counter these negative effects associated with menopause.

The current guideline recommendation for exercise is to achieve at least 150 minutes of moderate activity such as brisk walking, riding a bike, or hiking; or at least 75 minutes of vigorous activity such as swimming, running, or sports in a week. Ideally, these activities should be spread out evenly over 4 to 5 days or every day of the week. Muscle-strengthening activities are encouraged for at least 2 days a week.

A heart-healthy diet emphasises an increased consumption of fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy products, whole grains, poultry, fish, and nuts and reduced intake of saturated fatty acids, red meat, sweets, and beverages containing added sugars.



HORMONE REPLACEMENT THERAPY (HRT) HAS BEEN A TOPIC OF DEBATE REGARDING ITS EFFECTS ON HEART HEALTH. WHAT IS THE CURRENT UNDERSTANDING OF HRT'S IMPACT ON CARDIOVASCULAR RISK IN MENOPAUSAL WOMEN?

Dr. Emily:

Hormonal replacement therapy (HRT), by virtue of replacing the depleted estrogen, would be expected to ameliorate the negative impact of menopause but in reality, it may not be as straightforward.

HRT may confer beneficial effects on the heart if used for younger women less than 60 years of age or less than 10 years from menopause. Outside of this, there is either a neutral or deleterious effect on heart health when HRT is used. In addition, HRT may be associated with an increased risk of venous blood clot formation and stroke in older women. The different types of estrogen formulation and the route of administration may have differential effects with observational studies suggesting transdermal estrogen preparation being safer. There may also be an increased risk of breast, endometrial, and ovarian cancers depending on a woman's susceptibility and formulation of HRT used. In short, HRT is effective in countering menopausal symptoms such as hot flashes and mood disturbances but the decision to use HRT needs to be individualised after carefully considering the potential risks and benefits.



SOCIOCULTURAL FACTORS CAN INFLUENCE HOW WOMEN PERCEIVE AND MANAGE THEIR HEART HEALTH. HOW CAN HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS ADDRESS THESE FACTORS AND EMPOWER WOMEN TO TAKE CONTROL OF THEIR CARDIOVASCULAR WELL-BEING?

Dr. Emily:

Sociocultural factors define the environment and our lifestyle choices which in turn has a direct impact on our health.

For example, many working women may also be burdened with household responsibilities and caring for the elderly and the young which in turn heightens mental stress while also reducing time to exercise and adopting healthy eating habits and thus increasing their risk of heart disease. Healthcare providers should be aware of these important sociocultural factors and should seek to create awareness and encourage women to adopt healthy lifestyle choices whenever possible.

ARE THERE ANY SPECIFIC CARDIOVASCULAR SCREENINGS OR TESTS THAT WOMEN SHOULD UNDERGO AS THEY APPROACH OR GO THROUGH MENOPAUSE?

Dr. Emily:

Early recognition of anxiety/ depression which are more common in women by healthcare providers allows timely treatment and reduces the negative impact on health.

It is important to maintain life's essential 8 which are - a healthy diet, participation in physical activity, avoidance of nicotine, healthy sleep, healthy weight, and healthy levels of blood lipids, blood glucose, and blood pressure. Therefore it is advisable for women to undergo screening tests to evaluate their cholesterol, sugar, and blood pressure levels which can be elevated with menopause and are often without any symptoms. However, these risk factors if left untreated may lead to a heart attack or stroke as a first manifestation. In addition, an overall evaluation of a woman's cardiovascular risk and strategies to optimise health including whether HRT may be beneficial is advisable. ❤️

