

## Let's Get Physical

*Fall 2008*

Women in midlife may find that their clothes just aren't fitting like they used to. It is a fact of life that menopause and aging bring many changes. While some are welcome, (no more pads or cramps-yahoo!) other changes are no fun at all, like the fact that your clothes seem to be a little tighter and even though you are skipping dessert, you can't seem to drop those pounds.

Not only do women in midlife gain weight from effects of aging and menopause, their body composition also changes. In particular, they lose lean muscle mass in a process called sarcopenia (lessening of muscle mass), which is the rarely mentioned but equally important companion to osteopenia (lessening of bone mass). Loss of muscle mass may make it harder to do our daily home or work activities, especially heavy ones like lifting laundry or washing the floor. And the relative increase in fat mass can change our appearance and add to the forces our joints, like our spine and knees, have to carry, which may accelerate arthritis.

Also, the changing composition of our body means we will develop more fat around our organs, called visceral or intra-abdominal fat. This fat puts us at a higher risk for cardiovascular disease and diabetes. Results evaluated from SWAN data indicate that women with a higher percentage of body fat<sup>1</sup> or higher body mass index<sup>2</sup> (weight for height) reported more menopausal symptoms, such as hot flashes and night sweats (<sup>1</sup>Adiposity and Reporting of Vasomotor Symptoms among Midlife Women: The Study of Women's Health Across the Nation. *American Journal of Epidemiology* 167(1): 78-85, January 1, 2008. <sup>2</sup>Longitudinal analysis of vasomotor symptoms and race/ethnicity across the menopausal transition: Study of Women's Health Across the Nation (SWAN). *American Journal of Public Health* 2006; 96:1226-35).

OK, so how about some good news? SWAN has allowed us to study what can be done to combat problems like pain, loss of physical function and increases in visceral fat accompanying menopause in women in midlife. The good news is that we know something that helps...**Physical Activity!** While we have known for years that exercise can help us all improve our blood pressure, reduce our stress, reduce our risk of cancer (in fact the Surgeon General suggests we all perform 30 minutes of moderate exertion exercise most days of the week), we have shown that being more physically active in midlife is associated with less pain, better physical function and less visceral fat. Now how's that for a triple benefit?

We don't necessarily mean you have to join a health club. We have found that being more active in your daily life, like walking to work or the train, taking care of family members and avoiding the couch, is related to less pain, more physical function and a healthier body composition. So keep doing what you're



doing or get up and do more (for those of you who are couch potatoes!) And stay tuned as we keep studying how great physical activity really is when it comes to our health, and the health of our families and communities.

**Sheila A. Dugan, M.D.**

Associate Professor

The WISH Project

Rush University Medical Center

**Below is a list of the American Heart Association's guidelines for physical activities.**

Light Exercise

Walking slowly around home, store or office

Standing performing light work such as making bed, washing dishes, ironing, preparing food

Playing billiards, croquet, darts

Moderate Exercise

Walking at a brisk pace (4 mph)

Washing windows or car

Cleaning garage

Playing badminton, basketball, table tennis, non-competitive volleyball

Dancing, fishing

Swimming leisurely

Vigorous Exercise

Walking (4.5 mph)

Jogging or running

Hiking

Shoveling

Basketball game

Cross country skiing

Bicycling (14-16 mph)

Soccer



**Try the tips below to increase your everyday physical activity. For even more tips, go to the American Heart Association website. ( <http://www.americanheart.org> )**

- Work in the garden or mow the grass. Using a riding mower doesn't count!
- Rake leaves, prune, dig and pick up trash.
- Go out for a short walk before breakfast, after dinner or both! Start with 5-10 minutes and work up to 30 minutes.
- Walk or bike to the corner store instead of driving.
- When walking, pick up the pace from leisurely to brisk. Choose a hilly route. When watching TV, sit up instead of lying on the sofa. Better yet, spend a few minutes pedaling on your stationary bicycle while watching TV. Throw away your video remote control. Instead of asking someone to bring you a drink, get up off the couch and get it yourself.
- Stand up while talking on the telephone.
- Walk the dog.
- Park farther away at the shopping mall and walk the extra distance.
- Wear your walking shoes and sneak in an extra lap or two around the mall.
- Stretch to reach items in high places and squat or bend to look at items at floor level
- Keep exercise equipment repaired and use it!



**SWAN Study Update:** The SWAN Study received a positive review of our grant submission to fund the continuation of the study. Once we receive a final decision from our funding source (2-3 months), we will inform our study participants. Thank you for your continued support of women's health. We look forward to continuing this pioneering study.