

# Ladies, Let's Get Physical

## THE PROS

Getting involved in sport and physical activity can prevent a wide range of ill-health problems, particularly in later life, as well as offer a myriad of health benefits. For girls, it can have a positive impact on both physical and psychological health, as well as reduce the risk of chronic diseases in later life.

For older women, it can help prevent many aspects of heart disease as well as chronic and degenerative diseases associated with aging, such as diabetes, hypertension, arthritis, osteoporosis and cardiovascular abnormalities. It also helps in the management of weight, contributes to the formation and maintenance of healthy bones, muscles and joints and reduces the risk of falls which can be particularly serious in older women.

One of its most important roles, is in helping people stay independent for longer. Much of the physical decline that is presumed inevitable with aging is now thought to be the result of inactivity, particularly among women, who experience hormonal changes that men generally don't. And while no one can guarantee that exercise will prolong life, it can absolutely enhance the quality of life

Thankfully, long gone are the days when women were perceived to be too weak for (and often banned from) participating in sport. Once upon a time we were prohibited from taking part in all sorts of physical activities, particularly endurance sports like marathons and cycling, the thinking at the time being that it compromised our reproductive health. Ironic, knowing what we know now about the benefits of exercise across a whole range of women's health concerns.

for older women who place a high value on their independence.

Sport can provide affirmations of self-empowerment and confidence, enhancing wellness and quality of life; as well as develop skills such as teamwork, goal-setting, the pursuit of excellence in performance and other achievement-oriented behaviours which can be invaluable to women and girls.

Physical activity can also facilitate good mental health for women (and men) of all ages, including the management of mental health conditions such as dementia and Alzheimer's disease; as well as promoting psychological wellbeing by reducing stress, anxiety, loneliness and depression. There are cultural and social benefits of exercising too; with a promotion of freedom of expression,

interpersonal networks, and new opportunities. It can expand opportunities for education and for the development of a range of essential life skills, including communication, leadership, teamwork and negotiation.

## THE CONS

After reading all of that, I am sure most of you are already half way out of the door with your training shoes on... Yes! No? Maybe you're thinking, "it sounds great but what if my bones are already too fragile", or maybe you're worried about the so-called 'women's problem' of a weak bladder (which is not exclusive to women by the way). It is however very common, even more so if you're a mother,



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to experience stress incontinence (which does affect men too, just less frequently). Stress incontinence means that even the smallest amount of exertion can cause you to pee unintentionally. And it may surprise you to learn that this is common to most women worldwide, even elite female athletes.

## THE WHYS

Physiologically women's bodies do differ from men's – or is it that men differ from women? Either way there are injuries and injury risks that are specific to women's health when it comes to physical activity. One of the most obvious differences between women and men is a wider pelvis in women. This results in a higher incidence of "knock knees" which may increase the Q (quadriceps) angle, arguably increasing the risk of women developing lower limb injuries like knee pain.

Hormones are also believed to increase the susceptibility of women to musculoskeletal injuries. Characteristically, women have greater ligament laxity, required for childbirth, however this too may increase injury risk due to altered joint support. Changes in oestrogen and progesterone levels throughout the life cycle and even within a women's monthly cycle can alter ligament laxity and predispose to injury. Although the upside is the cardiovascular protective benefits of oestrogen which complement the health benefits of physical activity for women.

Discussion and research still focuses on three prevalent issues for the active woman: stress incontinence, osteoporosis and the 'female athlete triad'. That's not to say these are unique to women, or men are immune, they too can suffer from stress incontinence and osteoporosis, but less frequently.

Although we won't discuss further the Female Athlete Triad in this article, it is something to be aware of in younger women, particularly those striving for athletic excellence, where there is potential for a combination of excessive training, with a low calorie intake (possibly undereating or an eating disorder) and the irregularity or cessation of monthly menstruation. This complex condition

can have long-term negative effects on a woman's reproductive and bone health.

## THE WHATS

What is very common and where, as health practitioners, we can much more readily help, is with regards to osteoporosis and stress incontinence.

**2** **Osteoporosis** can be intimidating and inhibiting. The prospect that a simple fall could break your hip or wrist can make you watch every step you take. Fear can replace the freedom to do all the things you love. Maybe you feel trapped between what to do that will help strengthen your bones and prevent osteoporosis or improve your already fragile bones – that being exercise; with the fear that if I exercise, lift weights, or trip whilst running I may fracture a bone. We understand how this can be a dilemma. However, learning more about osteoporosis and understanding that exercise done in a safe manner can have huge benefits for your bone health, can help you overcome this fear. In the years after menopause, women can lose up to one-fifth of their bone mass. Men aren't immune to the disease either, but women are more than three times more likely to experience osteoporosis, compared with men. But osteoporosis is not inevitable. The good news is there's a lot you can do to shield your bones from this disease. And the sooner you act, the better off you – and your bones – will be. We've put together information and exercise sheets to help. Just ask us for more information.

**3** **Stress Incontinence.** Most people take bladder and bowel control for granted – until something goes wrong. One in three women will experience stress incontinence, versus one in 12 men. What's the cause? For women, it's typically rarely discussed but is commonly the result of childbirth and aging. For men, it's most often a side effect of treatment for prostate problems. The good news is that treatments are becoming more effective



and less invasive. Understandably the predicament exists where exercise can actually help strengthen and improve the symptoms of stress incontinence, however exercise initially can be the thing that causes an embarrassing accident and frequently results in people losing confidence and stopping activities all together. Strengthening the muscles of the pelvic floor and deep abdominals (core muscles) can improve both bladder and bowel control. Following a home programme of specific exercises, or at a later stage joining a Pilates class, will improve strength and allow progression towards other activities where you were otherwise fearful of having an accident. Health practitioners are well-trained in treating incontinence, some specialising in women's health issues specifically. So, visiting your local health practitioner for advice can be an empowering step in the right direction. Talk to your local health practitioner for more advice, pointers to local support services and any helpful exercise sheets they may have on the topic.

