

Script – Print – The heavy lift when it comes to women and exercise

It's no great surprise to read that men and women both benefit from working out. But women may receive greater benefits from regular exercise than men, according to a [study](#) published in the Journal of the American College of Cardiology.

The study centered on the importance of exercise as a way to avoid dying prematurely. The researchers studied data from 400,000 people and found that women who exercised were 24% less likely to die early from any cause. Men who exercised, however, were 15% less likely to die early.

The study also revealed that the women who exercise had a 36% lower risk of dying from a cardiovascular event, compared to men at 14%. That's important because women have twice the risk of dying from a heart attack than a man.

Mary O'Meara is a nurse practitioner with OSF HealthCare. She says society still views heart attacks more as a man's disease. That's simply not true.

"Usually, a male is feeling this really bad chest pressure, chest pain going in the left arm into the jaw, very pale. Women, very often, will just complain of fatigue, nausea or heartburn. 'I feel wiped out. I just can't walk across the room. I need to sit down,'" explains O'Meara. "Unfortunately, that can be a sign of a heart attack in a female, and it gets missed quite often."

While any movement is good, O'Meara stresses the importance of women incorporating strength and/or resistance training, such as lifting weights. Frequency and the amount of weight depend on the person and their situation.

"For a long time, women were encouraged to do more aerobics-calisthenics. We were always thought of as the weaker sex, I guess you can say, and we weren't really encouraged to do any weight bearing exercise," says O'Meara. "A lot of research has come back that states that women should be focusing on weight bearing exercises for several different reasons."

Strength training can also help women as menopause becomes an issue. According to O'Meara, hormones start changing between the ages of 40 and 50 – a time when women start losing muscle and see an increase in body fat. Strength training can help with that change, along with other health issues. "We found that weight bearing exercise can reduce our risk of dementia and Alzheimer's, and also reduce our risk of osteoporosis, which is a big one," says O'Meara.

O'Meara also has a nutrition tip for her patients. Protein, she says, is important for women to prevent muscle loss, especially during menopause. O'Meara recommends 30 milligrams of protein before and 15 milligrams after a workout, to help rebuild muscle that has been naturally broken-down during exercise.

Additionally, O'Meara is a proponent of healthy fats. She encourages patients to incorporate grape seed oils, olive oils, fish oils, flax seed oils, nuts and avocados into their diets. Her philosophy is that good fats battle bad fats, and good fats protect our heart.

O'Meara stresses that it's never too late for women to start exercising. Even a short walk or work around the home, for instance, can go a long way to a healthier future. "You read many testimonials from people who were couch potatoes and never exercised," she says. "And then, they go into these exercises and do wonderful things that have really made a difference."

For more information on women's health, visit the OSF HealthCare [website](#).