

How Decreases in Hormones Impact Performance

Athleticism evolves with age, but that doesn't mean it goes away. VIS Expert Melissa Shays, ND, LAc, explains how women can train smarter through menopause—focusing on recovery, nutrition, and strength—and how younger athletes benefit from learning these lessons early for lifelong performance.

As more women embrace athletics throughout their lives—whether they're starting in their 40s or continuing into their 60s and beyond—the conversation around menopause and performance has finally started to shift. For years, menopause was seen as a time to slow down, but today, it's becoming clear that menopause can be a powerful stage for growth, adaptation, and strength.

While menopause may feel far off for middle school or college athletes, understanding how it affects the body early on lays the groundwork for informed choices and long-term success. It also helps younger athletes empathize with and support the older women in their lives or role models, creating a more inclusive and informed athletic community. This awareness sends a powerful message: your athletic identity doesn't expire—it evolves.

We spoke with VIS Expert Melissa Shays, ND, LAc, a Naturopathic Doctor, licensed Acupuncturist, sports nutritionist, and athlete herself, to explore how menopause affects performance and how the habits women build today can protect performance, resilience, and strength later in life.

What Is Menopause, Anyway?

According to [Cleveland Clinic](#), Menopause is defined as the point at which a woman hasn't had a menstrual period for 12 consecutive months, usually happening between ages 45 and 55. It is a natural part of aging and marks the end of a woman's reproductive years, as the ovaries stop producing reproductive hormones.

The years leading up to it—called perimenopause—can begin 8-10 years earlier and are marked by shifting hormone levels, particularly estrogen and progesterone. These changes can affect everything from mood to muscle mass, endurance to sleep, and even how the body recovers after training.

“Hormone changes during your period, times of high stress, overtraining, or menopause can affect your energy, mood, and motivation,” Shays said. “This makes workouts feel more

challenging. During perimenopause and menopause, hormone levels fluctuate and gradually decline. Unlike earlier in life, they don't cycle back to higher levels, which can lead to prolonged fatigue and tissue breakdown."

How Decreases in Hormones Affects Athletic Performance

During menopause, the decline in estrogen can make it harder to maintain peak performance. Fatigue and slower recovery may become more common, hot flashes may cause sleep disturbance, and mood changes can impact motivation.

"You can take steps now to boost your athletic performance for life. Hormone levels rise, cycle, then decline from puberty to menopause," Shays said. "By lifting weights, finishing endurance workouts, having strong health habits, and prioritizing quality sleep, you help counteract the changes associated with menopause."

One of the biggest long-term concerns during and after menopause is muscle mass and bone density. Lower estrogen levels can lead to bone mass loss, increasing the risk of fractures. But athletes have an edge: strength training, impact activities (like jumping), and fueling properly can help protect bones for life.

"Strength training and adequate protein intake build strong muscles and bones. Sleep and rest allow your body to recover and maintain performance levels (or gain)," Shays said. "These steps are essential for everyone, but they are especially critical during menopause, when lower hormone levels no longer signal the body to rebuild and repair."

In other words: the habits you build now matter later. Regular strength training, consistent recovery, and solid nutrition support current performance while also building the foundation for a stronger future athlete.

Nutrition, Supplements, and the Role of HRT

Nutrition plays a large role in managing menopausal changes. According to the [Cleveland Clinic](#), eating calcium-rich foods, vegetables, and lean proteins, along with getting enough Vitamin D, and Omega-3s during menopause, can help mitigate symptoms. Avoiding caffeine, alcohol, ultra-processed foods, smoking, and added sugars also helps. Starting these nutritional habits at younger ages can affect athletic performance throughout life.

"Eat enough protein," Shays said. "Nutrition and sleep have strong effects on performance throughout your life."

As for supplements or hormone replacement therapy (HRT)? That's personal.

The Mental Game: Staying Strong Inside and Out

Memory and concentration issues, along with feelings of brain fog, can also happen during menopause. Shays encourages athletes to reflect on their emotions—take out a piece of paper and list the emotions you face.

“Mood swings, irritability, anxiety, and self-doubt are all common during menopause,” Shays said. “You might already deal with some of those emotions during high-pressure seasons or injuries. That experience is valuable—it helps you build tools you’ll use later.”

So what helps with mood? Shays encourages athletes to start with the basics:

- Fuel with whole foods that stabilize energy
- Talk with someone you trust
- Sleep to allow your body to repair
- Manage stress with mindfulness, movement, or journaling

“HRT and other hormone prescriptions, like birth control, are individual choices that should be made with your medical team,” Shays added. “Research focused specifically on women is growing, and the science of performance is changing rapidly.”

Steps to Start Now

There are steps we can take now to make our transition through future hormone cycles smoother—and our future selves will be grateful. Here’s how to build that foundation today:

1. Lift weights. Strength training builds durable muscles and bones that support us as hormone levels shift.
2. Develop physical and mental resilience. Stress management skills pay off later, when energy and motivation naturally fluctuate.
3. Get good sleep. Quality sleep is the base layer of hormonal health, recovery, and long-term wellbeing.
4. Prioritize protein. Consistent protein intake supports muscle, bone density, and steady energy.

Beyond these steps, the most valuable thing we can do is establish sustainable habits: movement we enjoy, sleep routines that work for us, and nutrition patterns we can maintain. When our hormones are more stable, it’s the perfect time to set ourselves up for long-term success.

The Takeaway: Start Strong, Stay Strong

Whether you’re a middle school sprinter, a college rower, or a 50-year-old CrossFitter, one message rings clear: athleticism evolves with age if you continue to take care of yourself.

“Start resilient lifelong habits now: fuel, lift, recover, and sleep,” Shays said. “Your future self will thank you.”

For younger athletes, learning about menopause now means setting a foundation for long-term performance and wellbeing. By talking about this now, even before it seems relevant, we destigmatize it. We normalize strength and performance at every stage. And we show younger athletes that their athletic journey can continue to expand throughout life.