

REVIEW ARTICLE

Healthy Aging and Menopause: Strategies for Indian Women

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ABSTRACT

With increase in the longevity of life, the population of women in midlife and older is increasing. Midlife marks a challenging period of a women's life where hormonal changes and menopausal transition occur and the incidence of non-communicable diseases increases. This period of life experience depends on various factors such as ethnicity, country of residence, literacy and socioeconomic class. Gender itself is a key factor that determines an individual's health. The need for a healthy lifestyle from early on needs to be emphasized as it plays a key role in healthy aging. There is also a need to spread awareness on prevention of NCDs and good post-retirement support. National health programs must include older adults and specialized and personalized care given according to their needs. This will help prevent health deterioration in midlife that reduces functional ability, work productivity and increased healthcare costs, leading to economic loss.

KEYWORDS

• Midlife women • Menopause • Non-communicable diseases • Healthy lifestyle

INTRODUCTION

India has seen a significant increase in life expectancy, with an 8.68-year rise from 62.1 years in 2000 to 70.8 years in 2019. By 2050, the global population of people aged 60 and

above is expected to double. Indian women typically enter menopause around 46.6 years, spending nearly a third of their lives in the postmenopausal stage. This period increases their vulnerability to chronic diseases, affecting

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physical, cognitive, and mental well-being. Midlife lifestyle choices significantly impact the aging process. However, women often neglect their health during this phase, posing risks. It's essential to prioritize their quality of life, considering their multiple roles and generational responsibilities.

The World Health Organization emphasizes that gender significantly influences health outcomes. In India, women often lack autonomy in decision-making, including their own healthcare, due to entrenched gender inequalities and biases. This results in women facing greater barriers to accessing healthcare compared to men.¹ Promoting gender sensitization is crucial to address these disparities, and efforts towards this are underway in the country.

Midlife is a pivotal phase for women, marked by perimenopause and menopause, requiring awareness about lifestyle adjustments and preventive measures. However, socioeconomic and cultural disparities affect women's access to healthcare and awareness, necessitating targeted interventions at both family and societal levels.² Health decline during this period can lead to reduced functional ability, work productivity, and increased healthcare costs, ultimately resulting in economic losses.³

A woman's quality of life and health in midlife are shaped by various factors, including societal and family dynamics. Location, marital status, gender, and wealth also significantly influence health outcomes and the aging process.² Adopting a healthy lifestyle, including a balanced diet rich in protein, calcium, and vitamin D, avoiding smoking and alcohol, and engaging in regular aerobic and resistance exercises, can enhance functionality and prevent mobility issues associated with aging. However, health decline is often mistakenly attributed to normal aging, leading to neglect and overlooked opportunities for intervention.

In India, rural areas face significant challenges, including early marriage, multiple pregnancies, early menopause, poor nutrition, and limited access to healthcare. These factors contribute to health issues in midlife and beyond, such as osteoporosis, depression, and non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Socioeconomic disparities are evident in health outcomes, with uneducated elderly experiencing more communicable diseases (31.9% vs 17.3%) and

educated elderly experiencing more NCDs (67.4% vs 47.1%).⁴ This highlights the need for targeted, individualized prevention strategies earlier in life to address these disparities.

India's post-retirement support system is notably inadequate, particularly affecting older women who prioritize family care over their own needs, leading to increased stress and vulnerability to mental health issues.⁵ Given the growing aging population and high incidence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), national health programs should prioritize older adults' unique needs. Expanding initiatives like the National Programme for Prevention and Control of Cancer, Diabetes, Cardiovascular Diseases, and Stroke (NPCDCS) to focus on postmenopausal care could be beneficial. Emphasizing preventive measures over curative treatments would not only be cost-effective but also help mitigate NCDs, ultimately improving the quality of life for older adults in India.

DISCUSSION

As life expectancy increases, women may face age-related health issues for longer periods, highlighting the importance of promoting healthy lifestyles, including good sleep, nutrition, exercise, relaxation and quality time with loved ones, to improve both physical and mental well-being. Future research should focus on understanding the diverse experiences of midlife across different populations, ethnicities, countries and socioeconomic classes.⁶ Developing accessible geriatric care in India is crucial.⁷ Raising awareness about healthy aging, preventing non-communicable diseases and providing post-retirement support can also make a significant difference. By shifting the perspective on midlife, we can recognize it as a phase of opportunities, learning and growth, where women often reach their most confident stage.⁶ This requires a collective effort to bring about change and support, involving individuals, families and society as a whole.

CONCLUSION

Empowering women with health awareness and accessible care, coupled with societal shifts addressing gender biases and socioeconomic disparities, can transform midlife into a phase of growth and confidence. Holistic approaches blending individual, familial, and policy-level

interventions hold promise for healthier aging trajectories in India's evolving demographic landscape.

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