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Take Control of your Midlife, Ladies!

Women take special care of their appearance when they hit teenagehood, and continue a regimented anti ageing and health maintenance programme into their marriage and motherhood. But once the kids are old enough to be independent or leave home, many seem to ignore their looks and health and slip into "disrepair".

This is a sad state of affairs, as between the ages of 45 and 65, menopause sets in and together with it, the risk of cancers and other diseases. However, many of these cancers and illnesses can be cured if detected early.

Dr Chua Yang, a consultant obstetrician & gynaecologist of A Clinic for Women, in her mid 30s, talks to New Breath about the need to take control of your midlife, and how to do it.

Tell us something about your work

Primary prevention and health education have always been my passion. That's why I am often involved in a programme called Continuing Medical Education, targeted at the medical profession for updating their knowledge. I give talks to GPs and O&Gs. I've been invited to speak by Health Promotion Board, Breast Cancer Foundation, Singapore Cancer Society, government departments, private corporations and community centres.

Occasionally, I practise some basic primary healthcare, like when I was a volunteer as a medical officer in Niger and Bangalore. It is very challenging to practise medicine with so little resources and paramedical support. It is also heartbreaking to see women living with their medical problems simply because of a lack of education, food and other basic resources.

From your experience, what usually happens to a woman's health in midlife?

Good health should be built from the very beginning of life and maintained throughout the different phases of life - childhood, adolescence, motherhood, menopause and beyond.

Women are not "suddenly" old just because they have reached menopause or midlife.

Physiologically, our bodies peak at around age 30 in terms of functions such as fertility, cardio fitness, bone health, etc. For example, throughout childhood and adolescence, we build up our bone mass by being active and taking in enough calcium. After 30, our bodies try desperately to maintain what we have "banked in" At the onset of menopause, there is a period of rapid bone loss, which stabilizes between 70 and 80.

If women were given a head start in life - exercise and consume sufficient foods with calcium - this pushes their peak bone mass to the highest level that is genetically possible. Coupled with a continuously active lifestyle,



The doctor in Bangalore India

Mind and Soul

calcium-rich diet and avoidance of alcohol, nicotine and caffeine, it will ensure strong bones, defying midlife and menopause!

Why do you think middle-aged women shun the necessary check ups? What needs to be done?

There are some common reasons that I have come across.

1. "I don't have any problems!"

Many women at menopause confess that their last PAP smear was after the delivery of their last child — some 20 years earlier! The whole idea behind "screening" is to prevent problems or at least to detect problems as early as possible.

2. "I don't have any time!"

It's true that our women tend to be working moms and are juggling their time on a thin wire. But we are talking about an hour's visit to the gynae once a year! It must be possible to work that into their schedule especially with so many night and Saturday clinics around.

3. "What I don't know can't hurt me!"

This may result from a combination of fear and ignorance lack of knowledge. My worry is that women citing this reason often have encountered friends or family members who have suffered from cancers or heart disease. If there is a family history of illness (breast cancer for example), it is even more crucial important that women understand their risks and go for regular check ups.

4. "If I admit to having symptoms, it's accepting that I am menopausal and old!"

This is back to the need for a continuous process of health maintenance. Denial and suffering in silence will not halt the ageing process.

5. "I can't afford to do expensive tests"

The costs are not as high as imagined — polyclinics offer subsidised rates, while specialists and medical centres may charge differently slightly more. Just call any clinic to enquire. Remember that on the whole — a PAP smear is cheap, surgery and radiation therapy for cervix cancer is very expensive!

If a woman has neglected early health screenings, she should consult her doctor as she approaches menopause. This is a wonderful opportunity to learn about the likely symptoms and difficulties of menopause and post-menopause. It is also a good time to update her cancer screening — mammogram, PAP smear, ultrasound scan and tumour markers.

How should a woman take control of her midlife in terms of health and anti ageing routines?

Every woman should know about the different stages in life that she will experience. Just as every expectant mother reads enthusiastically about pregnancy and delivery, the woman facing transition changes around menopause should also educate herself on the subject.

A lifetime habit of following a sensible diet with the necessary supplements will do wonders. Exercising from young will ensure that the heart stays healthy and fit. Weight-bearing exercise is the key to healthy bones and prevention of osteoporosis and fractures.

Avoiding harmful substances like nicotine, alcohol and caffeine, and excessive sun exposure will help maintain our skin and bones, in addition to preventing cancers.

There are also the social and emotional sides of health and ageing. In societies where women are respected in their mature years for the contributions they have made to society, it is easier for them to deal with menopause. It is time to relax and reap the fruits of their labour.

However, in societies where economic contributions are valued, ageing may be depressing. Ageing women may lose their effectiveness and confidence at work. Their health may start to decline and they may suspect resentment from their loved ones. It is important for women to foster good relationships with those around them...their spouses, children, colleagues, and to "collect" as many friends as possible. This social circle will be invaluable in lending support in later, possibly difficult years.

For women in the years around and beyond menopause, our Woman to Woman Menopause Support Group offers to help them understand their experiences better and also direct them to further medical advice, if necessary. Do call the Menopause Support Group hotline number. 6394141 from Mon to Fri, 3pm to 5 pm; or Clinic For Women tel no. 6463333 during office hours, for registration or enquiries.

Prior to her private practice, Chua Yang was an Associate Consultant of the Menopause Unit, KK Women's and Children's Hospital. She has been in private practice since 2002, in the area of general O&G with special interest in managing menopausal health and cancer screening.

Apart from being the medical advisor of "Woman to Woman Menopause Support Group, the energetic and charming lady is also the secretary of the Menopause Research Society, the Singapore representative of members of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, a member of the Osteoporosis Society of Singapore and Obstetrics and Gynaecology Society of Singapore, as well as research investigator of the Singapore Cancer Society.