

UNC Expert Explains How Strength Training and Nutrition Can Support Health During Perimenopause

Abbie Smith-Ryan, PhD, explains why perimenopause is a window of opportunity to build strength and support long-term health through exercise and nutrition.



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September 21, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Perimenopause can bring changes in energy, sleep, body composition, strength, and metabolism. But [Abbie Smith-Ryan, PhD](#), encourages women to look at this stage of life as more than something to simply endure.

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Smith-Ryan, a leading researcher in exercise physiology, body composition, and women's health, describes perimenopause as a “window of opportunity” — a time when exercise, nutrition, and other lifestyle choices can help support health well beyond the menopausal transition.

“It's a huge window of opportunity, not only for our health, but for lifestyle changes that can impact our lifelong

health,” Smith-Ryan said during a recent [UNC Nutrition Research Institute Appetite for Life](#) presentation.

Perimenopause often begins in the early 40s, although Smith-Ryan noted that women may begin experiencing symptoms in their late 30s. During the transition, hormonal fluctuations can coincide with changes in muscle, body composition, metabolism, bone health, sleep, mood, and other aspects of health.

While those changes can be frustrating, Smith-Ryan emphasized that women have tools available to help support their bodies through the transition.

Build and protect muscle

Resistance training is one of Smith-Ryan's strongest recommendations.

Muscle supports much more than physical appearance. Strength helps people maintain mobility and independence, perform everyday tasks, and support metabolic health as they age.

Smith-Ryan emphasizes that women do not need complicated routines or hours in the gym to benefit.

"Consistency beats complexity," she said.

Resistance bands, dumbbells, body-weight exercises, and other forms of resistance can all be useful. For someone who currently does no strength training, even adding one session per week can provide benefits.

Smith-Ryan shared results from a recent six-week study of high-intensity resistance training in perimenopausal women. Participants trained twice a week for approximately 30 minutes and experienced significant improvements in strength. Researchers also observed improvements in muscle quality and early positive changes in bone.

Her message: relatively small investments of time can make a difference.

Aerobic exercise remains important, too. Walking, cardiovascular exercise, intervals, and short bouts of movement throughout the day can complement resistance training.

"You don't have to have two hours a day," Smith-Ryan said.

Instead, she encourages women to move consistently and adjust the type and intensity of exercise based on their individual health and goals.

Eating less is not always the answer

Nutrition is the other major piece of Smith-Ryan's approach.

Many women grew up hearing a familiar formula for managing weight: eat less and move more. During perimenopause, however, chronic restriction or underfueling can work against the body.

"Eat less, move more really backfires," Smith-Ryan said. "It actually often lowers our metabolism."

Rather than focusing primarily on eating less, she encourages women to improve diet quality and make sure they are giving their bodies enough fuel.

One of her simplest recommendations is also one of the most practical: ****eat more vegetables.****

She encourages a plant-forward eating pattern that includes vegetables, fruits, beans, legumes, whole grains, high-quality proteins, and healthy fats, while reducing some highly processed foods.

Prioritize protein and fiber

Protein becomes especially important as women work to preserve muscle and bone.

Smith-Ryan recommends thinking not only about how much protein women consume, but also when they eat it. She suggests aiming for approximately 30 grams of protein at a meal and spreading intake throughout the day, beginning with breakfast.

Greek yogurt, protein-rich snacks, small meals, or protein shakes can help women reach their needs when meals alone are not enough.

Fiber is another tool Smith-Ryan believes deserves more attention during perimenopause.

She recommends aiming for at least 25 to 30 grams each day. Vegetables, fruits, beans, legumes, whole grains, nuts, seeds, and foods such as chia seeds can help increase intake.

Fiber supports digestive health and satiety and is associated with cardiovascular health and other long-term health benefits.

An investment in the decades ahead

Smith-Ryan's recommendations are not about creating a perfect diet or exercise routine. Instead, she encourages women to identify realistic changes they can maintain.

Her starting points are straightforward: move regularly, incorporate resistance training, add cardiovascular or interval exercise when appropriate, prioritize high-quality foods, eat adequate protein, increase vegetables and fiber, and stay hydrated.

"Move your body," Smith-Ryan said. "Consistency is number one. Don't worry too much about what it looks like."

For women navigating a stage of life that can sometimes feel unpredictable, that message offers a different perspective. Perimenopause represents change, but it can also provide an opportunity to build strength and establish habits that support health for decades to come.

To hear more of Smith-Ryan's recommendations on exercise, nutrition, sleep, and navigating

perimenopause, watch the full Appetite for Life presentation at uncnri.org/AFL.

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