

Be a hottie at 40

Middle age is no reason to give up fabulousness. You need to start early and swim right through it

Mitali Parekh
@timesgroup.com

You are approaching the big 4-0, and your body shows it before your mind acknowledges it. There are a lot of changes that women go through as a prelude to menopause. The good news is that if you start working out, even in small ways such as walking every day, in your early to mid 30s, you will skim over bodily changes such as prolonged periods, hair loss, loss of energy, calcium depletion and drop in metabolic rate.

Marketing executive Suvarna Goel took charge of her fitness after the birth of her child in 2003. She fit a visit to the gym, meditation and cardio into her daily life-style, even if it means getting up at 4.45 am after going to sleep at 1 am.

"I used to be into athletics in school, but in my 20s, my job dictated late hours and junk food," says Goel, who turned 40 last April. "But after my child's birth, I knew my fitness had to be more regimented and diet too. It started out with wanting to shed the pregnancy weight, but now I do it as a non-negotiable part of my life — wake up, brush my teeth, exercise, meditate, shower."

THE CHANGES WITHIN

Consulting dietician Jyoti Lalwani explains, "In your 40s, calcium depletes at a faster rate; you need 1200 mg calcium a day. To avoid an actual menopause situation, you should make some pre-hormonal changes. Calcium depletes faster in the presence of acidic foods, so stop the aerated drinks."

To resist hair-loss, you'll need the help of two friends — Vitamin E and Omega 3 fatty acids. If you are vegetarian, incorporate almonds, peanuts, walnuts, sunflower seeds, dried apricot, spinach, flaxseeds and green olives in your diet. If you are non-vegetarians, incorporate at least two to three servings of fish per week.

You will also need to up ingestion of Vitamin B and B12. "If you feel muscle weakness, lethargy, frequent muscle cramps," says Lalwani, "it could indicate a muscle deficiency. Sprouts will give that extra dose of energy since they are still growing. Magnesium also needs to be accounted for, to keep joints functioning smoothly. You can get it through whole grains, lentils and pulses.

Suvarna combated early signs of any vitamin or calcium deficiency by packing small dabbas from home, which she eats through the day.

Annual health check-ups will keep you vigilant against any upcoming diseases. "You should also get scanned for visceral fat ratio," she says. "Surface fat is easily visible, but fat collection around organs, can be present even in a lean person. Fat collection around the pancreas can be construed as high blood sugar, and is an early indicator of cholesterol." A good helping of calcium and Vitamin B12 will also ward off cervical spondylosis.

THE CHANGES OUTSIDE

Since Suvarna took charge of her fitness early on, she showed very few physical signs of ageing. "I go to a gym only in the monsoons, when the rain spoils your shoes, your iPod, etc," she says. "Only on Mondays I relax. I run on alternate days for 70-75 minutes. On other days, I do weights and muscle training, followed by a 45-minute walk. I train one part of the body on each day and also do suryanamaskars."

Aerobics instructor Nalina Talwalkar emphasises that exercise can fortify you against the changes that come with the decade. "You get tired very fast and find that you cannot eat like you used to," she says. "You put on weight very quickly because the body's metabolic rate drops. PMS starts 10-15 days in advance, as opposed to 4-5 days and periods can become horribly heavy." The increased circulation also delays or stops appearance of pigmentation spots on the face.

Many women go on crash diets to lose weight, but then find it harder to tone the muscles up. "You have to keep a diet of 1200-1500 calories a day," say Nalina. "Your body needs that much. One thing I have noticed is that though women in their 40s tend to become tired sooner, their exercise is purely mental now. Their will power is stronger and more than aesthetics, they are driven by a need to be happy."

This certainly holds true for Suvarna, who gets up at 4.45 am, even if she has had only an hour's sleep. "My body just wakes up and instead of tossing and turning in bed, I'd rather work out."

Lalwani points out that the presence of oxygen is important for any fat-burning activity, so yogic breathing exercises help not only calm the mind, but also lose weight. Suvarna ends her workout with meditation and then heads to the shower. "The morning hours are completely without interruption and non-negotiable for me," she says.



Suvarna Goel, a marketing executive, has not experienced any of the downsides of turning 40 because of her consistent exercise routine