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**“A mental health game-changer”: Embodied experiences of the psychosocial, body image and wellbeing outcomes from strength and resistance training during perimenopause.**

Background: Resistance exercise facilitates healthy aging in women and engaging in resistance training can substantially improve physiological health outcomes in midlife. However, the psychosocial outcomes of strength training are often overlooked in the research and there is a significant gender gap addressing the optimal exercises for women to consider through perimenopause and beyond. Furthermore, research has not accounted for women's perceptions and experiences of strength training during perimenopause.

Aims: Given the pervasive messages that exist in fitness culture around exercise and appearance, the aim was to understand embodied experiences of strength and/or resistance training during the perimenopausal transition, in the context of body functionality and vasomotor symptoms. Furthermore, to discuss the societal stigma that exists around muscularity in women.

Methods: An online, qualitative survey was distributed via University webpages and social media. Participants self-identified as individuals experiencing menopausal symptoms (inclusive of non-binary or trans) who engaged in regular strength training. Participants' ages ranged from 35 to 60 years ( $n = 58$ ,  $M = 48.03$ ) with 98.3% identifying as a (cis-) woman, 82.8% as White British, and 46.6% strength training for three years or more. Reflexive thematic analysis was employed to interpret patterns of shared understandings.

Results: Three themes were developed: 1) Empowerment in “feeling strong” and building muscle, 2) “A mental health game-changer”, and 3) Invisibility of the perimenopausal body. Strength training was understood as beneficial for improved mobility, yet many reported more subtle changes (e.g., improved mood) through the transition and welcomed a sense of focus and control. Evidence-based awareness of strength training in midlife was perceived to be lacking within medical guidance and fitness environments.

Conclusion: Findings offer nuanced insight into perimenopausal experiences that emphasise enhanced body image and wellbeing outcomes of strength training; useful for clinical practice and those working with clients in physical activity spaces.