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Riding Through Change

The Impact of Menopausal Symptoms on Equestrians, the Coach's Role and Factors Supporting Sustained Activity **Kathryn Howard** * Dr Claire Mills Corresponding Author

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i Introduction

Perimenopause and menopause (peri/menopause) bring significant Equestrianism physiological and psychological changes impacting athletic performance and well-being (Davies et al., 2022).

self-esteem, mood regulation. 88% of adult equestrians are female (The British Horse Society, 2024).

Nearly 40% of women over 45 engage in no other physical activity (Equine Business Association, n.d.).

menopause in equestrians.

Importance of

Enhances physical, emotional,

Key benefits: social connection,

Despite high female participation,

there is limited research on peri/

and psychological health.

Research Gap

Sport-Specific Challenges Success depends on the horse-rider partnership: - Confidence - Cognitive focus - Emotional control

Research Aims

• To identify the physical, emotional, and psychological symptoms of peri/menopause experienced by equestrians and assess their impact on performance and training.

• To explore equestrians' perceptions of their coaches' support of peri/ menopausal symptoms and identify what athletes deem necessary for effective coaching support during this transition.

 To provide recommendations for equestrian coach education and wider governing strategy to better support athletes through perimenopause and menopause

Methodology

Interpretivist perspective:

Focused on individual experiences of equestrian women during peri/menopause (Thomas, 2022).

Naturalistic, person-centred approach:

Acknowledged sensitivity around menopause, identity, and sport performance (Heath et al., 2018).

Empowering participants:

Explored personal perceptions of reality.

Data Collection

Participants narrated experiences, identified symptoms, and described impacts on

disciplines, including: - Dressage - Show Jumping

Bespoke online questionnaire:

Mixed methods: Quantitative + Qualitative.

equestrian activities.

Scope

- Western

- Leisure Riding

Covered 20+ equestrian

their equestrian activity (n = 285). SAMPLING

> Combined purposive and convenience sampling, with recruitment via equestrian social media platforms (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Women who self-identified as currently or previously experiencing peri/menopausal symptoms impacting

DATA ANALYSIS

PARTICIPANTS

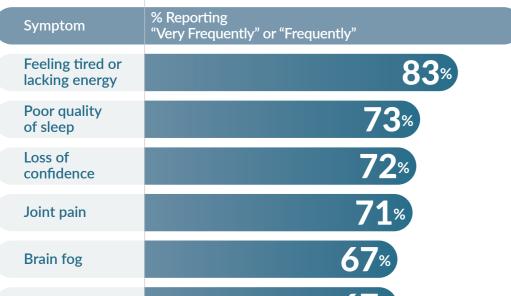
- Quantitative: Descriptive statistics identified trends in
- symptom frequency, coach support, and training impact. - Qualitative: Thematic Analysis revealed patterns across narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

THEMES IDENTIFIED

- Emotional and psychological impact
- Cognitive challenges
- Impact on equestrian participation
- Physical health and fitness - Support and coping mechanisms

Results Symptoms

Top Reported Symptoms (n = 285 participants)

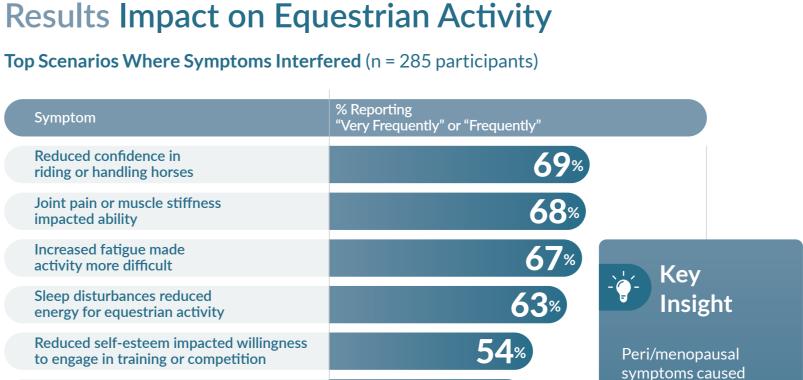


A wide range of peri/ menopausal symptoms Symptom reported.

Significant physical, cognitive, and emotional impacts on equestrian activity.

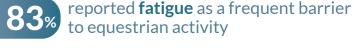
Key Insight

Findings reveal a high symptom burden, especially around:



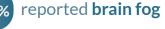












cited joint pain or stiffness affecting riding ability



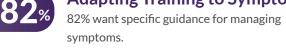


Eventing - Carriage Driving

environment (Campbell & Wasco, 2000).

| Self-doubt67%Memory problems65%Reduced self-esteem65%Negative self-judgement64%Feeling overwhelmed63% | Fatigue Cognition Confidence These factors are critical for equestrian safety, performance, and progression. | Feeling overwhelmed or mentally drained reduced participation/enjoymentLoss of enjoyment or reduced passion for equestrian activitiesMood changes (e.g. irritability, low mood) impacted motivationSelf-doubt led to avoidance of challenges or competitive opportunitiesMemory and concentration difficulties impacted decision-making, safety, and learning | 52% 52% 60% 49% 49% 49% 49% 42-47% | ted 8% Only 8% rated coaching support as "very effective" said their coach never checks in |
|--|--|--|---|---|
| Results Symptom Impact Thematic Analysis of 'Women's Voices Participant narratives revealed the multifaceted impact of peri/menopausal symptoms on equestrian participation. Analysis identified five key themes: | S' P | esults Coaching and eri/menopausal Support hematic Analysis of 'Women's Voices' | "I think it's hard for a coach to bring it up, so I do, and then I worry everything I do gets seen through a 'batty old lady lens" (Participant 60). | night sweats brain fog self-doubt Memory joint pain verwhelm bloating mental self-doubt joint pain verwhelm pelvic pain Memory joint pain verwhelm pelvic pain |
| Emotional and Psychological Impact (e.g., low mood, anxiety, reduced self-esteem, emotional exhaustion) | Women's voices illustrate the depth and complexity of navigating symptoms while continuing equestrian activities. | Challenges in Discussing Menopause with Coaches (e.g., discomfort disclosing symptoms, fear of judgment or misunderstanding) | "Some [coaches] seem to feel it's an excuse" (Participant 120). "Approachable, good listeners without getting | mentional detachment e exhaust in ability vaginal dryness emotional detachment e emotional outbursts Criss of confidence irritability weight fluctuations in ability to focus depressive episodes at 800 frequent crying muscle aches hot flushes |
| Cognitive Challenges (e.g., brain fog, memory lapses, difficulty concentrating) | "Loss of confidence, 10 years of hell, 45–55" (Participant 270). | B Variability in Coaching Support (e.g., inconsistent experiences, generational and gender gaps) | bogged down" (Participant 45). "A good trainer doesn't need to know the ins and outs, they just need to adapt to any symptoms of anything" (Participant 115). | negative self-judgement disrupted sleep |
| Physical Health and Fitness (e.g., fatigue, muscle weakness, pain, weight changes) | "Brain fog, complete memory blanks: Terrifying" (Participant 6). "I had very bad periods (menstruation), I couldn't leave the house, let alone ride!" (Participant 169). | Qualities of an Effective Coach (e.g., empathy, listening skills, adaptability, building confidence) | Key Takeaway | safe empatheticflexible belief calm mentor, heard a open |
| Impact on Equestrian Participation (e.g., reduced motivation, withdrawal from riding and competing) | "Has stopped me riding and driving I'm struggling. I know my horse knows" (Participant 109). "Loneliness and isolation from the community | Peer and Support Networks (e.g., reliance on rider-to-rider support, social isolation without it) | Peri/menopause profoundly affects equestrian women's confidence, cognition, and participation—yet stigma, silence, and a lack of tailored support leave many navigating this | belief calm mentor heard ing understanding nonjudgmentalconfidence validation Supportive patient |
| Support and Coping Mechanisms (e.g., importance of supportive coaching, peer networks, resilience strategies) | as not able to do the preparatory work to get there" (Participant 121). | B Menopause in Sporting Culture and Regulation (e.g., lack of flexibility, stigma in sport, medication restrictions) | transition alone. Coaching empathy, peer connection, and cultural change are critical for sustaining lifelong participation. | Supportive spositive trainer coach included skillful Communication reassurance educate |
| Landscape for Peri/ "L | /hat Women Want from Coaches isten and adapt." vey results highlight the top skills and knowledge peri/menopausal equestrians | expect from coaches, Expect from coaches, | Coaching Gap and Stigma | Conclusions and Recommendations Practical Action & Policy Implications Conclusions |

Adapting Training to Symptoms





ranked by the combined percentage of "absolutely important" and "very important" responses. **Top Priorities**

(85%+ combined) These are the most critical areas where coaches are expected to be well-equipped: \checkmark Respecting athlete confidentiality and Very Important: 41% personal boundaries 8 Openness to learning more about Absolutely Important: $64\% \rightarrow 95\%$ total peri/menopause and women's health Very Important: 31% Absolutely Important: 42% 2 Strong communication skills to foster an open and supportive environment Very Important: 41% Ability to adapt training environments Absolutely Important: 45% \rightarrow 91% total Very Important: 46% **3** Empathy and sensitivity in discussions about peri/menopause Absolutely Important: 44% → 91% total Very Important: 47% Ability to adapt training plans based on 4 individual needs Absolutely Important: 51% Very Important: 40% \rightarrow 91% total **5** Confidence in discussing peri/menopause-related topics without stigma \rightarrow 86% total Absolutely Important: 42% Very Important: 44% Awareness of how peri/menopause can impact athletic performance and recovery Absolutely Important: 35% Absolutely Important: 45% \rightarrow 86% total Very Important: 41% Very Important: 41%



→ 83% total

 \rightarrow 76% total

This study demonstrates the significant impact of peri/menopausal symptoms on equestrian participation and identifies critical gaps in coach education, awareness, and emotional support. The findings contribute to the growing body of research advocating for more inclusive and responsive sporting environments for midlife women (Women in Sport, 2018)

25% of the participants had never discussed their symptoms with a coach, and only 8% rated coaching support as "very effective." Participant feedback highlights fear of stigma and a lack of structured opportunities to raise these issues, consistent with Lane (2024), who found that coaches are often unprepared to engage in meaningful conversations around menopause despite

Peri/menopausal symptoms significantly disrupt equestrian participation, affecting performance, confidence, and training continuity through physical, emotional, and cognitive impacts.

remains limited: over half of respondents

reported no regular check-ins or training

Stigma, discomfort, and isolation are common, underlining the urgent need for menopause to be recognised within equestrian sporting culture.

Although the desire to remain active is strong, support systems must evolve Despite these challenges, coaching support to address the physiological and psychological challenges of midlife

Flexible Coaching Approaches

coaches and open communication.

Educational Resources & Access 80% to Professionals

70-80% value workshops, webinars, and ongoing access to nutrition, physical, and psychological support.



Community and Peer Support 83% endorse raising menopause awareness in the equestrian community and value peer networks.



Governing Body Recognition 77% believe National Governing Bodies should provide stronger policy-level support and resources.

Findings - Key Priorities considered as: 'Extremely Beneficial' or 'Beneficial'

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I wish I had known that menopause would affect my confidence so badly in advance of it happening. My riding ability has not really changed but my mental ability has. I've battled against it for 10 years or so thinking I was just too old! Thinking I just couldn't ride a test or leave the xc start box yet I could do it once I got started. This mental failure on my part has wrecked my ability to compete and enjoy doing so like I used to! Any support to help this problem at the onset could have saved me the anguish of loss of self belief."





Symptom Burden and Participation Risk A substantial proportion of participants reported experiencing symptoms daily or weekly, including fatigue (83%), sleep disruption (73%), and joint pain (71%), all of which reduced their ability or motivation to ride. Emotional and cognitive symptoms,

Need for Structural and Cultural Change Participants strongly endorsed changes across education, coaching practices, community awareness, and national governance. There was clear support for enhanced menopause awareness, menopause-informed coach education, such as low confidence, brain fog, and and flexible, individualised training self-doubt, were frequently cited as barriers to training continuity, performance, adaptations. These findings support wider initiatives in sport, such as Sport England's and competition. These results align with Huang et al. (2023), who identified that Uniting the Movement (2021), which calls for age- and gender-responsive support menopause-related physical and psychological effects are often overlooked structures. within sports participation models.



The commitment to equestrian participation remains strong; however, without targeted support, peri/menopausal symptoms risk accelerating disengagement from the sport.

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It's only very recently I realised my problems were menopausal, and I discussed with my trainer, who I was with already. I originally went to her because I was close to giving up because of losing my nerve, and I had heard she was a very understanding trainer. Now we are finding solutions together."

(Participant 164)

its impact on performance.

Recommendations for Practice & Policy

Coach Education

adaptations.

- Integrate menopause awareness into equestrian coaching qualifications. • Train coaches to provide confident, empathetic, stigma-free support.
- Equip coaches to adapt training sessions based on symptom fluctuations. • Foster open communication, offering reassurance, choice, and flexibility.

Organisational and

- **Community-Level Support** • Promote menopause awareness campaigns across yards, clubs, and events.
- Create peer-led forums and online
- Provide webinars and resources on
- National Governing Body Involvement • Recognise peri/menopause as a performance and inclusion issue. • Fund targeted training, research, and
- policy initiatives to embed menopause awareness within sport strategy. communities for menopausal equestrians.
- lifestyle, recovery, and training strategies during menopause.

Takeaway 9-

Without systemic support, midlife equestrians risk exclusion; recognising and responding to peri/menopause is key to an inclusive, thriving sporting future.

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REFERENCE LIST



Support at this stage is not a luxury—it's a necessity for participation, well-being, and equity."

(Participant insight + Women in Sport, 2018)

`**`**[-Takeaway

Coaches working with peri/menopausal equestrians should prioritise confidentiality, communication, empathy, adaptability, and stigma-free support. While emotional support is still valued, it's seen as slightly less essential than the coach's ability to understand, adapt, and communicate effectively around the physiological and psychological impacts of peri/menopause.