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Riding Through Change

The Impact of Menopausal Symptoms on Equestrians, the Coach's Role and Factors Supporting Sustained Activity

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Introduction

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

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.).

Importance of Equestrianism

Enhances physical, emotional, and psychological health.

Key benefits: social connection, self-esteem, mood regulation.

Research Gap

Despite high female participation, there is limited research on peri/menopause in equestrians.

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**.

Provided a **supportive, respectful environment** (Campbell & Wasco, 2000).

Data Collection Bespoke online questionnaire:

Mixed methods: **Quantitative + Qualitative**.

Participants narrated experiences, identified symptoms, and described impacts on equestrian activities.

Scope

Covered 20+ equestrian disciplines, including:
- Dressage
- Show Jumping
- Eventing
- Carriage Driving
- Western
- Leisure Riding.

PARTICIPANTS

Women who self-identified as currently or previously experiencing peri/menopausal symptoms impacting their equestrian activity (n = 285).

SAMPLING

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

DATA ANALYSIS

- **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)

Symptom	% Reporting "Very Frequently" or "Frequently"
Feeling tired or lacking energy	83%
Poor quality of sleep	73%
Loss of confidence	72%
Joint pain	71%
Brain fog	67%
Self-doubt	67%
Memory problems	65%
Reduced self-esteem	65%
Negative self-judgement	64%
Feeling overwhelmed	63%

A wide range of peri/menopausal symptoms reported.

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

Key Insight

Findings reveal a high symptom burden, especially around:
- **Fatigue**
- **Cognition**
- **Confidence**

These factors are critical for equestrian safety, performance, and progression.

Results Impact on Equestrian Activity

Top Scenarios Where Symptoms Interfered (n = 285 participants)

Symptom	% Reporting "Very Frequently" or "Frequently"
Reduced confidence in riding or handling horses	69%
Joint pain or muscle stiffness impacted ability	68%
Increased fatigue made activity more difficult	67%
Sleep disturbances reduced energy for equestrian activity	63%
Reduced self-esteem impacted willingness to engage in training or competition	54%
Feeling overwhelmed or mentally drained reduced participation/enjoyment	52%
Loss of enjoyment or reduced passion for equestrian activities	52%
Mood changes (e.g. irritability, low mood) impacted motivation	49%
Self-doubt led to avoidance of challenges or competitive opportunities	49%
Memory and concentration difficulties impacted decision-making, safety, and learning	42-47%

Key Insight

Peri/menopausal symptoms caused performance-related impacts across:
- **Confidence**
- **Communication**
- **Enjoyment**
- **Participation**

Key Findings

- **83%** reported **fatigue** as a frequent barrier to equestrian activity
- **72%** experienced **loss of confidence**
- **67%** reported **brain fog**
- **71%** cited **joint pain or stiffness** affecting riding ability
- **69%** reported **reduced confidence handling horses**
- **8%** Only **8%** rated coaching support as "very effective"
- **51%** said their coach **never checks** in regarding peri/menopause well-being
- **77%** want **coaches trained in menopause support**
- **83%** seek **flexible training plans** tailored to symptoms

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:

- **A — Emotional and Psychological Impact** (e.g., low mood, anxiety, reduced self-esteem, emotional exhaustion)
- **B — Cognitive Challenges** (e.g., brain fog, memory lapses, difficulty concentrating)
- **C — Physical Health and Fitness** (e.g., fatigue, muscle weakness, pain, weight changes)
- **D — Impact on Equestrian Participation** (e.g., reduced motivation, withdrawal from riding and competing)
- **E — Support and Coping Mechanisms** (e.g., importance of supportive coaching, peer networks, resilience strategies)

Women's voices illustrate the depth and complexity of navigating symptoms while continuing equestrian activities.

"Loss of confidence, 10 years of hell, 45–55" (Participant 270).

"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).

"Has stopped me riding and driving... I'm struggling. I know my horse knows" (Participant 109).

"Loneliness and isolation from the community as not able to do the preparatory work to get there" (Participant 121).

Results Coaching and Peri/menopausal Support
Thematic Analysis of 'Women's Voices'

- **A — Challenges in Discussing Menopause with Coaches** (e.g., discomfort disclosing symptoms, fear of judgment or misunderstanding)
- **B — Variability in Coaching Support** (e.g., inconsistent experiences, generational and gender gaps)
- **C — Qualities of an Effective Coach** (e.g., empathy, listening skills, adaptability, building confidence)
- **D — Peer and Support Networks** (e.g., reliance on rider-to-rider support, social isolation without it)
- **E — Menopause in Sporting Culture and Regulation** (e.g., lack of flexibility, stigma in sport, medication restrictions)

"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).

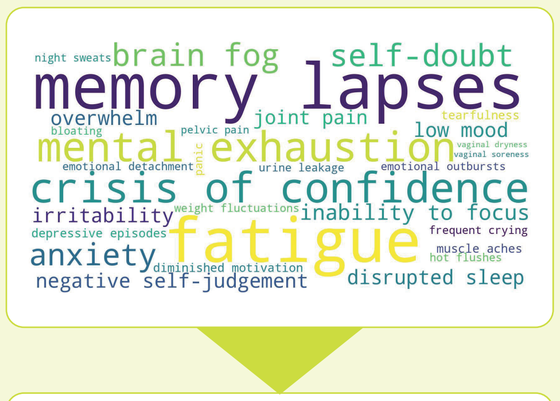
"Some [coaches] seem to feel it's an excuse" (Participant 120).

"Approachable, good listeners without getting 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).

Key Takeaway

Peri/menopause profoundly affects equestrian women's confidence, cognition, and participation—yet stigma, silence, and a lack of tailored support leave many navigating this transition alone. Coaching empathy, peer connection, and cultural change are critical for sustaining lifelong participation.



Building a Supportive Landscape for Peri/Menopausal Equestrians

- **82%** **Adapting Training to Symptoms** — 82% want specific guidance for managing symptoms.
- **77%** **Access to Menopause-Aware Coaches** — 77% want access to trained, menopause-aware coaches and open communication.
- **80%** **Educational Resources & Access to Professionals** — 70–80% value workshops, webinars, and ongoing access to nutrition, physical, and psychological support.
- **83%** **Community and Peer Support** — 83% endorse raising menopause awareness in the equestrian community and value peer networks.
- **77%** **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'

"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."

(Participant 142)

What Women Want from Coaches
"Listen and adapt."

Survey results highlight the top skills and knowledge peri/menopausal equestrians expect from coaches, 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:

1. **Respecting athlete confidentiality and personal boundaries** — Absolutely Important: 64%, Very Important: 31% → 95% total
2. **Strong communication skills to foster an open and supportive environment** — Absolutely Important: 45%, Very Important: 46% → 91% total
3. **Empathy and sensitivity in discussions about peri/menopause** — Absolutely Important: 44%, Very Important: 47% → 91% total
4. **Ability to adapt training plans based on individual needs** — Absolutely Important: 51%, Very Important: 40% → 91% total
5. **Confidence in discussing peri/menopause-related topics without stigma** — Absolutely Important: 42%, Very Important: 44% → 86% total
6. **Awareness of how peri/menopause can impact athletic performance and recovery** — Absolutely Important: 45%, Very Important: 41% → 86% total

High Importance (80-85% combined)

7. **Basic understanding of peri/menopause and its symptoms** — Absolutely Important: 42%, Very Important: 41% → 83% total
8. **Openness to learning more about peri/menopause and women's health** — Absolutely Important: 42%, Very Important: 41% → 83% total
9. **Ability to adapt training environments based on individual needs** — Absolutely Important: 43%, Very Important: 41% → 84% total
10. **Ability to suggest alternative training methods for symptom management** — Absolutely Important: 38%, Very Important: 45% → 83% total
11. **Recognising whether an athlete may need additional professional support** — Absolutely Important: 38%, Very Important: 43% → 81% total

Moderate Importance (70-80% combined)

12. **Providing emotional support and encouragement** — Absolutely Important: 35%, Very Important: 41% → 76% total

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.

Discussion

Interpreting the Findings

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).

Coaching Gap and Stigma

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 its impact on performance.

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, such as low confidence, brain fog, and self-doubt, were frequently cited as barriers to training continuity, performance, and competition. These results align with Huang et al. (2023), who identified that menopause-related physical and psychological effects are often overlooked within sports participation models.

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, and flexible, individualised training adaptations. These findings support wider initiatives in sport, such as Sport England's *Uniting the Movement* (2021), which calls for age- and gender-responsive support structures.

Key Insight

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

"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)

Conclusions and Recommendations
Practical Action & Policy Implications

Conclusions

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

Despite these challenges, coaching support remains limited: over half of respondents reported no regular check-ins or training adaptations.

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 to address the physiological and psychological challenges of midlife.

Recommendations for Practice & Policy

Coach Education
- Integrate menopause awareness into equestrian coaching qualifications.
- Train coaches to provide confident, empathetic, stigma-free support.

Organisational and Community-Level Support
- Promote menopause awareness campaigns across yards, clubs, and events.
- Create peer-led forums and online communities for menopausal equestrians.
- Provide webinars and resources on lifestyle, recovery, and training strategies during menopause.

Flexible Coaching Approaches
- Equip coaches to adapt training sessions based on symptom fluctuations.
- Foster open communication, offering reassurance, choice, and flexibility.

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.

Takeaway

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

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)