



What are the top three
healthcare concerns for women

Over 50?

Cooper Clinic's Dr. Gretchen Toler outlines major health concerns for the aging female population

“Cooper Clinic. How may I direct your call? Thank you,” says receptionist Fifi Blackwell. She transfers the call, moves a stack of papers so that they make a perfect “L” at the corner of her desk, and there she goes again: “Cooper Clinic. How may I direct your call? Thank you.” So articulate, so friendly, so perfect ... just like her navy dress suit, polished nails, and pearls. “When I started working here, there were eight doctors. Now, there are 18,” she said with pride. Fifi makes the perfect first impression for the Cooper Aerobics Center, a 30-acre, multi-divisional health and fitness complex off Preston Road in Dallas.

Kenneth H. Cooper, M.D., M.P.H., launched the center in 1970, two years after he introduced the term “aerobics” to America in his first best seller, *Aerobics*. Cooper Clinic, one facility of the center, has served more than 70,000 people, not just from the Metroplex but from around the world.

Gretchen Toler, M.D., is a staff physician who specializes in internal and preventive medicine. She received her B.S. in biology at Texas Christian University and her medical degree from the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School. The *Profile* asked Dr. Toler to discuss the top three health concerns for women over 50.

Cardiovascular Disease

About 950,000 Americans die of cardiovascular disease each year, which amounts to one death every 33 seconds, reports the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Heart disease and stroke are the principal components of cardiovascular disease and the first and third leading causes of death in the United States.

“Cardiovascular disease is probably the most important [health concern],” said Toler. “Women generally get heart disease a little bit later in life than men. There’s some thought that pre-menopausal hormones have some protective benefits.”

Toler said that the risk for cardiovascular disease increases significantly after 50. She emphasized the importance of knowing your risk

factors. “If you have a family history of heart disease, recognize that you need to start early with a healthy diet and exercise. Knowing your cholesterol, blood sugar, and blood pressure is very important,” she said.

The Mayo Clinic (www.mayoclinic.org), the first and largest integrated group practice in the world, reports that a blood pressure (BP) measurement should be taken every two years, or more if your BP is greater than 135/85 millimeters of mercury (mm Hg). A BP of 120/80 mm Hg is optimal.

Toler agreed that this is a reasonable screening recommendation for the general population, however, she said, “certain medications (birth control pills, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatories, antidepressants, and decongestants, for example), smoking, daily alcohol use, weight gain, and high levels of stress can all affect blood pressure.

“Women with risk factors for high blood pressure may need to be checked more often,” she continued. “Even mild high blood pressure puts you at risk for cardiovascular disease, so we tend to diagnose or treat it a lot sooner than we did in the past.”

Toler suggested eating plenty of fruit and vegetables. “Studies that have looked at lowering blood pressure have suggested 8 - 10 servings of fruit and vegetables a day,” she said. “Particularly if you are worried about getting diabetes, which is a major risk factor for heart disease, exercise is critical.”

According to CDC, 17 million people have diabetes in the United States; more than 9 million are women and an estimated 3 million have it and don’t know it. “A lot of studies on preventing diabetes have recommended three hours a week of moderate cardiovascular exercise. So roughly 30 minutes a day,” Toler said.

Does the doctor follow doctor’s orders? “I do. I usually manage to get three hours a week of exercise. And there are weeks that I do better than that.”

Toler further explained that research in preventing cardiovascular disease has suggested diets with whole grain, high fiber foods are more beneficial than a high protein, low carbo-

hydrate diet. “I’m pretty negative on the Adkins diet toward women because while people certainly lose weight on it – I think there are some people that need to go on a low carbohydrate diet – one of the problems with real high protein intake is that it may indirectly lower bone density. You need to be getting a whole lot of extra calcium if you’re on a real high-protein diet like that. Women generally aren’t getting enough calcium for that type diet.”

Two other risk factors for cardiovascular disease are sleep apnea and obesity. “You could really look at obesity as a separate health issue. It’s becoming such a problem,” Toler said. “Obesity is a risk factor for diabetes, which then puts you at a much higher risk for heart disease and high blood pressure.”

Toler stressed that young adults should lay a groundwork for a healthy lifestyle. “Studies suggest that people who are already overweight and sedentary in their 20s are more likely to have cardiovascular problems by the time they’re in their 40s,” she said. “So I love to see people here who are in their 20s. There’s just so much potential to really make a difference in their health.”

Breast Cancer

Breast cancer is second to lung cancer as the leading cause of cancer-related deaths among women. The American Cancer Society (ACS) reports that 75 percent of all diagnosed cases of breast cancer are among women 50 years old or older.

“The best tool that we have right now for prevention is screening,” Toler said. “Women should get mammograms yearly and do regular self-examinations.”

More than 2 million women in the United States have been treated for breast cancer. This year about 40,410 women will die from the disease (ACS). Toler said that they have seen an increase in breast cancer in women who are post-menopausal, but that she has treated young women, too. “I have taken care of women in their 20s who have had breast cancer. Probably the youngest patient I’ve seen with breast cancer was 27,” she said.

“You could really look at obesity as a separate health issue.”

By Britney Porter

Although doctors aren't sure what causes breast cancer, there are risk factors linked to the disease. Besides gender and age, ACS reports a number of other risk factors including

1) **Race:** Caucasians are slightly more likely to get breast cancer than African-Americans, but African-Americans are more likely to die of this cancer. Asian, Hispanic, and American Indian women have a lower risk of getting breast cancer. 2) **Menstrual Cycle:** Women who began having periods early (before 12 years old) or who went through menopause after the age of 55 have a slightly increased risk of breast cancer. 3) **Not Having Children:** Women who have had no children, or who had their first child after age 30, have a slightly higher risk of getting breast cancer.

On a positive note, ACS reports that breast cancer death rates are declining, as a result of earlier detection and improved treatment.

For a list of more risk factors, visit ACS's Web site, www.cancer.org.

Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis is often called the "silent disease" because bone loss occurs without symptoms. Ten million individuals are estimated to have the disease in the United States and 8 million are women, reports the National Osteoporosis Foundation (NOF).

Said Toler: "It is astounding to me how many people have osteoporosis, or osteopenia which may lead into osteoporosis, and do not know they have it. Osteoporosis puts you at risk for fractures, and many people may lose height due to collapse of the vertebrae."

Today, 10 million people in the United States are estimated to have osteoporosis; 8 million are women; 2 million are men. It is a health threat for about 55 percent of women 50 years old or older, including 5 percent of African-American women, 10 percent of Hispanic women, and 20 percent of both Caucasian and Asian women, according to NOF.

The foundation's Web site (www.nof.org)



Dr. Gretchen Toler says osteoporosis affects over half of all women over 50.



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Toler suggested investing in some calcium supplements and vitamin D, particularly 800 units of vitamin D a day. Weight-bearing activities that cause the bones to work against gravity may also be a huge investment. "Exercise that involves impact like walking and jogging may help build your bones better than swimming, for example," Toler said. "Strength training is really critical to build bone density. For women over 40, strength training two to three times a week needs to be a part of their exercise program."

Strength training equipment is available at the Cooper Fitness Center, another division of the Cooper Aerobics Center. The fitness center caters to 3,800 members and visitors with a restaurant, an outdoor walking/jogging trail, exercise classes, personal training, as well as basketball, tennis and swimming facilities. An all-inclusive membership to the fitness center is \$975 for a one-time initiation fee, and then monthly dues are \$150 per individual. Family and couple memberships are available at \$1,515 and \$230 per month, respectively. And seniors over 65 years old pay \$80 per month, plus the initiation fee.

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