



CHOICES

campaign



JUBILEE WOMEN

Fiftysomething women - lifestyle and attitudes now and fifty years ago

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive summary . . . . .	.2
Key findings . . . . .	.2
Choices, opportunities and aspirations . . . . .	.3
Independence . . . . .	.4
Home/work balance . . . . .	.4
Relationships and family . . . . .	.5
Body image . . . . .	.6
Worries . . . . .	.7
Health . . . . .	.7
HRT and the HRHs . . . . .	.10
Conclusions . . . . .	.13
Selected Bibliography . . . . .	.14
Methodology . . . . .	.14

FOREWORD

It is not often, as a social scientist, that one has the pleasure of reporting on positive, encouraging aspects of human existence. Social scientists tend to focus mainly on the downside of life - dysfunction, deviance, drunkenness, disorder, delinquency, disease, divorce, drug-abuse. To redress the balance a bit, the Social Issues Research Centre (SIRC) was founded with the intention of studying positive aspects of human behaviour, lifestyles and social relations.



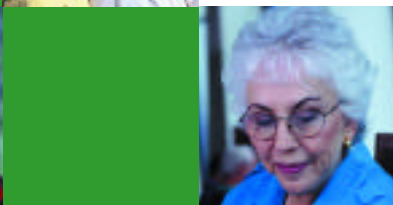
Even for SIRC, however, the findings of our Jubilee Women study came as something of a surprise. We were commissioned by HRT Aware to conduct research comparing the lifestyles of fiftysomething women now with those of women their age 50 years ago - with a particular focus on women's experiences of the menopause. An interesting project, and one that we approached with enthusiasm, but not really expecting to come up with any earth-shattering revelations.

Personally, I had never given much thought to the menopause, and if I thought about it at all, it was as something to be dreaded - an unpleasant experience in itself, leading to the even greater unpleasantness of official 'old age'. So I was somewhat taken aback when the findings of our focus groups and surveys came in, showing that, for most women, almost all aspects of life actually improve following the onset of the menopause. On question after question - whether we asked about careers, relationships, hobbies and interests, travel opportunities, energy levels, health and well-being, independence, and sex - the response was the same: for the majority of women, it gets better after the onset of the menopause.

The research reveals some interesting new worries about the disadvantages of living longer. But these could not overshadow the surprisingly positive findings: the lives and expectations of fiftysomething females are significantly better now than they were in the 1950s, and, on the whole, they improve with age. I had heard people say that 'life begins at 50', but as a scientist I needed evidence to believe such statements. Now I have some.

Kate Fox

Co-Director, Social Issues Research Centre





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To mark the Jubilee year, HRT Aware commissioned the Social Issues Research Centre (SIRC) to find out how much the lifestyles and attitudes of fiftysomething women have changed in the past 50 years. The study involved interviews and focus groups with women in their 50s, and a national survey of women in this age group, as well as a review of social history and social science research literature.

Are fiftysomething women nowadays more independent than in the 1950s? Do they have more choices and opportunities than their mothers' generation? Are they healthier? Are their relationships with partners and family more rewarding? Are they happier? Do fiftysomething women now have different worries and concerns? How do they feel about the menopause? What differences have medical advances such as HRT made to the lives of today's women?

The most important, and perhaps most surprising, message emerging from the findings of this study is that for most women, the menopause can now be a positive and liberating experience. Instead of dreading the onset of 'the change', the study found that many women can now look forward to better relationships, more energy, more travel, better working life, better health, more freedom and better sex.

KEY FINDINGS

"Life begins at 50"

- Most fiftysomething women today feel that they have **more choices** in everything from work to relationships to leisure pursuits, more independence, **more freedom**, better health and **more fun** than women of the same age 50 years ago.
- All aspects of women's lives - health, work, sex, career, relationships, travel, interests, energy, happiness - seem to improve after the onset of the menopause.
- This is particularly evident among women taking HRT, where the perceived improvement in careers, relationships, health, well-being and, sex-life, is significantly higher.
- The research revealed a **new 'elite'** - nicknamed the HRHs (Hormone-Rich and Happy) - a mainly middle-class, educated, well-informed minority, who are benefiting from these positive effects.
- The SIRC study also revealed new concerns for women, including **worries about longevity** (specifically loss of independence in old age); concerns about the **'culture of fear'** and decline of trust in modern society; **difficulties in balancing home and work commitments** and concern about **increasing social pressure** to maintain a youthful appearance.

"100 years ago the average age of the menopause was 47, but the life expectancy of British women was only 49. Now women become menopausal at just over 50 years old but life expectancy is nearer 80, so we can expect to spend 25 or 30 years in the post-menopause. The big question is what do you do about it?"

That question makes this report enlightening and intriguing. I was particularly interested in the fact that overall, women find postmenopausal life more fulfilling - but it was particularly revealing that there is a significant increase in that fulfillment in those women who have chosen to take HRT.

In the UK, only 11% of menopausal women are current users of HRT – but tellingly 72% of menopausal female doctors use it. Decisions about its use are often based on myth and misconception, with many that do use it stopping at the first sign of a side effect. Most of these effects are transient though – the problem is they are unexpected, or not previously explained about, and assumed to be ongoing. Often a simple change of dose or type of HRT would help.

Consequently, many women do not continue with HRT long enough to gain the long-term benefits. Over the years I have been moved by stories of women who have suffered from the long-term effects of loss of oestrogen to their bones, bladders, hearts, eyes or memory. Women who wished that they had known enough at the time of the menopause to ask for guidance about their choices.

Women nowadays have high expectations of their elongated lives. They need to be able to make the kind of informed choices that will help them to maximise their enjoyment of all those extra years stretching out ahead, choices that perhaps our mother's generation and certainly our grandmother's generation did not have."



Dr Annie Evans
Women's Health
Specialist Bristol

CHOICES, OPPORTUNITIES AND ASPIRATIONS

The fiftysomething women in our focus groups and interviews all felt that they had more choices, more opportunities and higher and more varied aspirations than women of their age in the 1950s, in every area of life from careers and earning power to relationships and leisure pursuits.

"I think we make more choices for ourselves these days. I'm quite sure that women 50 years ago didn't do things to please themselves quite so much."

"There was a time when women of a certain age were expected to behave in a certain way, and that isn't there anymore."

Education opportunities

Specifically, fiftysomething women feel that there are now more educational opportunities for women, and more opportunities to pursue careers - even in what used to be regarded as male professions, such as engineering and architecture.

"There weren't the choices on leaving school in those days."

"Well, I went back to college and did a degree course and graduated in Fine Art two years ago. I don't think you could do that 50 years ago: it was eighteen or nothing."

"My reason [for doing a course] is that I could do something for myself. Not for the children or the husband, just for you. And maybe my mother didn't have that choice."

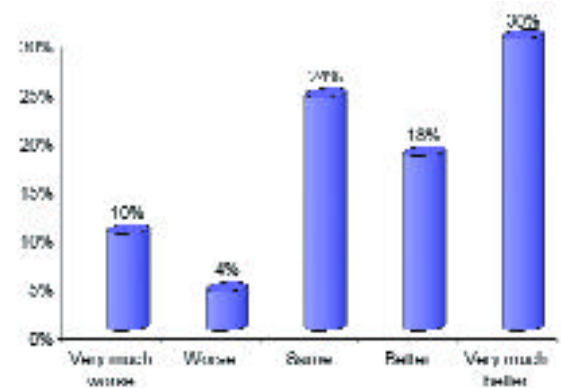
In our national survey, over half of the women also said that their ability to work and pursue a career had improved since the onset of their menopause.

Choice

Fiftysomething women also believe that women nowadays have far more choice and freedom in social and leisure activities - and the majority of the respondents in our survey also felt that their travel opportunities and pursuit of hobbies and interests had improved since the onset of menopause.



Travel opportunities since the menopause



"At our age now, we think our life is just starting again, whereas our mothers thought it was just ending."

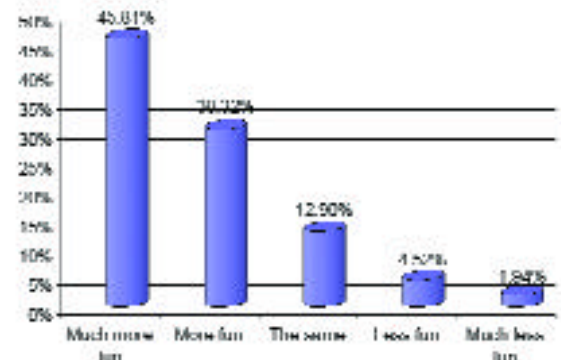
"The taboos have completely disappeared. Our mothers might have smoked, but they wouldn't have smoked in public places. Women never went to pubs."

"My parents were horrified when I first went in a pub."

"If there's something you missed when you were younger, you think, well, I'm going to do it now!"

Despite these advances in choice and freedom, some of the women in our focus groups did not feel that their lives were necessarily more fun or more exciting than those of women their age in the 1950s.

Enjoyment in life compared to women their age in the 1950s



"I think they had fun in a different way then - family gatherings and that sort of thing."

"We might not think it was fun, but it was in a different way."

However, over 75 per cent of women said that life was more fun now than for women of their age 50 years ago, and 65 per cent said that they were personally more happy now than they had been before the onset of their menopause.



INDEPENDENCE

The women in our focus groups saw themselves as having a much greater degree of independence than women of their age fifty years ago. This was seen as being mainly a result of greater earning power - having their own disposable income - but also a matter of changing attitudes.

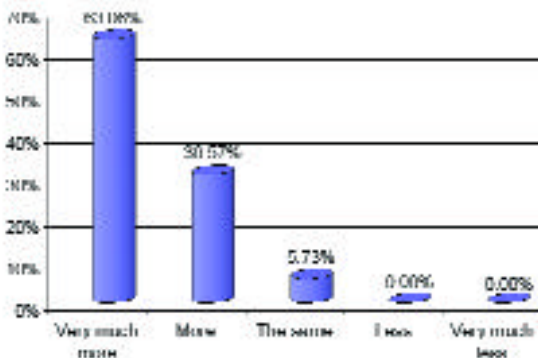
"We're more independent because we've all had careers, so we've had our own money, which our mothers didn't. They just had some housekeeping and that's it. Even if they did work, the money was expected to go into the house pot."

"In 1969, as a single woman with a small child, I tried to buy a washing machine on HP. I was refused because without a husband they would not entertain it."

"My mother never had a chequebook until after my father died. That would be unheard of now. Women have much more say on how the purse strings are spent."

"I think we are more allowed to think for ourselves, whereas our mothers knew exactly what was expected of them."

Independence compared to women their age 50 years ago



Over 93 per cent of women expressed the view that they had more independence in making decisions about their own lives and in family life than women of their mothers' generation.

More than two thirds of women also felt that they had become personally more free and independent since the onset of their menopause.

HOME/WORK BALANCE

Along with greater choice and independence, fiftysomething women see their lives as being more complicated and in some respects more difficult than their mothers', because more women are trying to juggle careers and domestic responsibilities - in contrast to the old pattern of the man earning the money and the woman running the home.

"It wouldn't have occurred to my mother to go out to work - once she'd got married, that was it. And she'd been trained as a nurse."

"I think we work harder in respect of having to do more. I think life is more complicated."

"Our own and other people's expectations of us are higher as well. We expect to be able to do more things - multi-tasking, I think it's called."

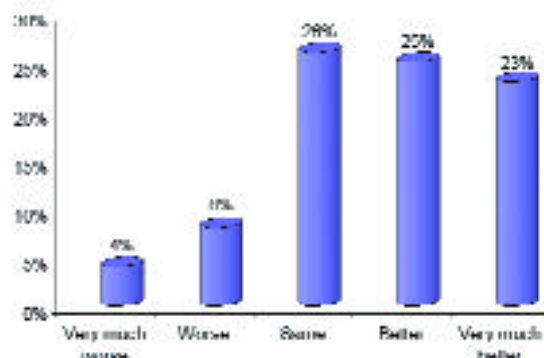
While men are nowadays more likely to help with household chores and childcare, women still feel that they carry most of the responsibility, and that housework, although less physically hard thanks to modern technology, is more stressful.

"There was an awful lot more grime and muck to deal with. We now have the conveniences to deal with this."

"You can leave a note and say get your own tea, or this is where I've gone - whereas if my father's dinner was not on the table it would not be acceptable."

On a more positive note, the findings of our survey indicate that the menopause does not adversely affect women's working lives, with nearly three quarters of women telling us that their working life had either remained the same or got better since the onset of menopause.

Work life since the onset of the menopause



Women in employment aged 45 - 59

1971 - 3.0 million 2001 - 3.9 million

RELATIONSHIPS AND FAMILY

Although fiftysomething women appreciate their greater freedom, choice and independence in marriage and personal relationships, some feel that this is a mixed blessing, and there are hints of nostalgia for the more rigid rules and commitments of earlier times.

"Couples used to stay married even though there was nothing left, whereas now we don't do that. We realise we've got a life and we've got choices."

"Before, the woman didn't have any money or earning ability so couldn't leave. We'll move on."

"I think a lot of people expect marriage to be perfect and they're not prepared for the ups and downs. They're not prepared to give way and work at it. Now, women say I don't like this and clear off - that's the impact of having more personal choice."

"I think younger women might think the grass is greener on the other side, but we've got more stickability. There might be a few cases where a woman has suffered in the relationship and then they suddenly say that's it, I can go. But I don't think women of our age do it light-heartedly."

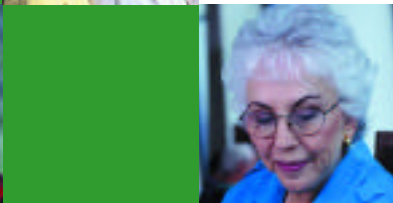
"It takes you all those years to train one, so you're not going to take on another one. And anyway, you'd only get someone else's cast-off!"

Sex life

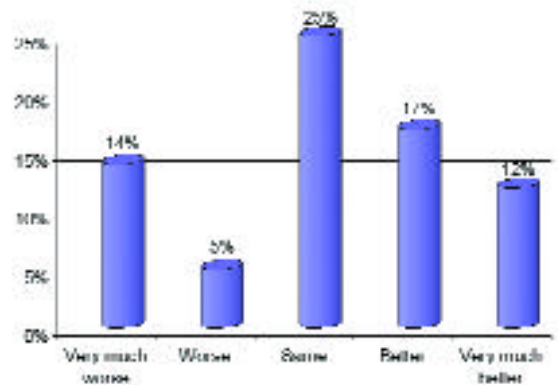
On the plus side, it seems that most women's sex lives are not impaired by the menopause - 64 per cent of women said that their sex lives had either stayed the same or got better since the menopause.

Female divorcees per 1,000 married population aged 45 and over

1961 - 0.9 2001 - 5.4



Sex life since the onset of the menopause



Relationships between mothers and daughters

Women feel that relationships between mothers and children, particularly daughters, are now very different from the 1950s - more open, more equal - mainly because women in their fifties are so much more 'youthful' today.

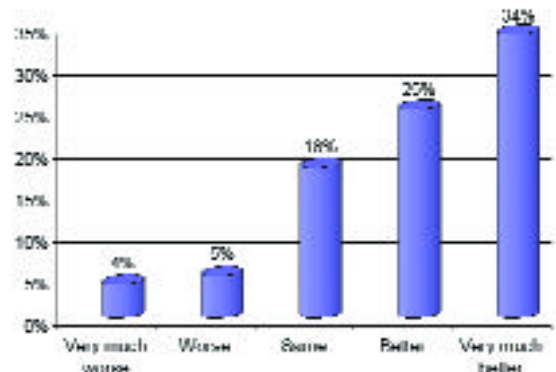
"We're more friends now, whereas when I was 20 my mother was my mother. I never borrowed her blouse. The relationship is more open. You wouldn't have found me watching a video and having a bottle of wine with my mum."

"I consider my children my friends. It's a much freer relationship. The children are more independent - whereas I was quite scared of my father. It was much more 'I'm the adult and you're the child' relationship, even after I had qualified and was earning a living."

Personal relationships

The personal relationships of these women also seem to improve with age: 59 per cent of women said that their relationships with their partners and families had got better since the onset of their menopause, and only 9 per cent felt that these relationships had deteriorated.

Relationships between partner/family since the onset of the menopause





Empty nest syndrome

Fiftysomething women recognise that the 'empty nest syndrome' can often be a problem for women their age, but some found the departure of the last child a liberating experience. They expressed some concern about the tendency of children nowadays to return to the parental nest, particularly after failed relationships, and about the demands of grown-up children and their families.

"Not only are children coming back, in some cases they're coming back with children."

"Now my son is married and settled, that's part of my life done. I love him to bits but I've done it and now he's Emma's. I'll always be his mother, but I have got a life now where I want to travel; I want to do what I want to do because I consider this phase of life as mine now."

"I might babysit for them at night so they can have a bit of a social life, but that's all - I wouldn't take on any more responsibility than that."

"Compared to our mothers, our parenting is diluted because we do so many other things as well. Our mothers dedicated their lives to us."

Caring for aging parents

A significant family problem for today's fiftysomething women is the worry and care of ageing parents. People are living longer, and the women we interviewed said that they were more likely to be looking after ageing parents, for longer, than previous generations.

As more women are working nowadays, ageing parents are more likely to be cared for in a residential home rather than in the family home, but when residential care is not an option, it tends to be the daughters (or even daughters in law) rather than sons who take on the burden of care.

"At one time, not long ago, a 50-year-old woman was perceived to be a granny in her rocking chair. Very few people lived into their 80s. Now you've got 60- and 70-year-olds looking after ageing parents."

"I pretty much gave up ten years of my life to looking after my mother - the last ten years of her life, she died at 95. It was never really expected that my brothers would do this."

BODY IMAGE

Many fiftysomething women feel that social pressure to remain young-looking and attractive is much stronger now than for women of their age in the 1950s. While they did not wish to see themselves as 'old', as their mothers were at their age, the women we interviewed still expressed some envy for their mothers' generation, who did not have the youthful ideal image constantly 'pushed down their throats', and who were allowed to 'grow old gracefully'.

"Women [in the 1950s] went from being non-married to being married, and once you were a mother you didn't worry so much about your figure."

"I was fascinated to see my great-aunts who were only in their 40s, undressing, because they had great winceyette vests on top of a huge pink bra that didn't fit very well and a corset that came up to meet it. When all this came off, everything just sagged and their bosoms came down to their knees. They were seen as elderly ladies in their 40s!"

"My mother walked the dog and kept the house but she didn't go out socially in the way that I do. And once past 40, she thought of herself I think as over the hill and past it."

"If you watch television, every other advert is for cosmetics - and in the magazines. They used to have features on housekeeping and the best way to dust!"

"Because a lot of women do manage to look younger now, if you look your age when you're 50, it feels like a failure. I keep thinking when will I be allowed to give up and stop trying so hard - when I'm 60? 70?"

WORRIES

Many of our sample of fiftysomethings felt that their worries and concerns were quite different from those of women their age in the 1950s, although analysis of women's magazine letters pages and other sources from that era indicate that women were in fact troubled by much the same concerns.

The main general worries emerging from our focus-group discussions were about children's well-being; world political issues, terrorism and the potential for war; perceptions that people are becoming more selfish, losing a sense of personal responsibility; the decline of trust and neighbourliness; perceived increase in aggression, negativity; etc. Much the same kind of worries appeared regularly in the pages of, for example, 'Housewife' magazine and the 'Picture Post' in the early 1950s. Some women recognise that many of their concerns are probably timeless:

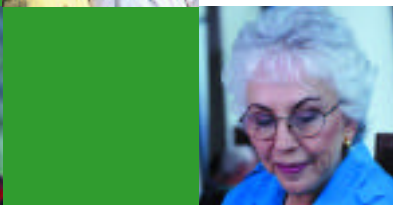
"I imagine our mothers felt exactly the same things about changes in society 50 years ago."

A number of current women's worries, however, do seem to reflect changing times. Increasing fears about personal safety and health, fuelled by media scare stories, and worries about the restrictions and litigiousness associated with this 'culture of fear', are indicators of current problems and obsessions.

"[In the 1950s] children were able to roam about much more freely - now child safety has become a huge concern."

"Fifty years ago the press didn't emblazon these things on their front page as they do now. It has increased our unease and fear of crime."

"If a man saw a woman broken down he might think twice about helping her because he might think, well, if she's going to turn around and accuse me of something else."



"Would a man on his own now help a child who looked lost - for fear of being accused of abduction?"

"Every day in the papers there's some new health scare. It's got so you don't know what's safe to eat or drink or anything."

HEALTH

Ironically, given current obsessions with healthy lifestyles designed to help us live longer, longevity itself is the most significant worry for many fiftysomething women. While health advice focuses almost exclusively on prolonging life, women are much more concerned about quality of life than quantity. Quality of life for these women is defined mainly in terms of independence: they do not want to grow old enough to become dependent.

"I am worried about any illness in old age which produces dependence."

"I don't really want to live to be old if I am not well."

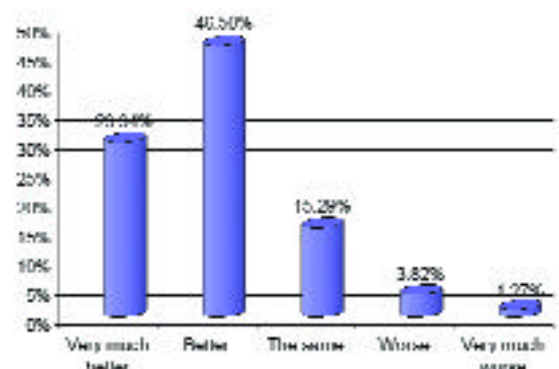
"The first sign of incontinence in old age, I'm going out to buy a fast car, drink a crate of gin and crash it into a wall. What I'm saying is I wouldn't want to live like that."

"I would like the freedom to have the right to choose at the time. I would hate to deteriorate into indignity."

"It's nice that people are living longer, but only if it's a quality life."

In general, however, fiftysomething women recognise that they are healthier than women of their mothers' generation, thanks mainly to advances in medical science. **In our survey, 76 per cent said that their health was better than that of women their age in the 1950s.** Specifically, they mention that diseases such as breast and cervical cancer are more likely to be detected, treated and cured than they were 50 years ago.

Health compared to women their age in the 1950s



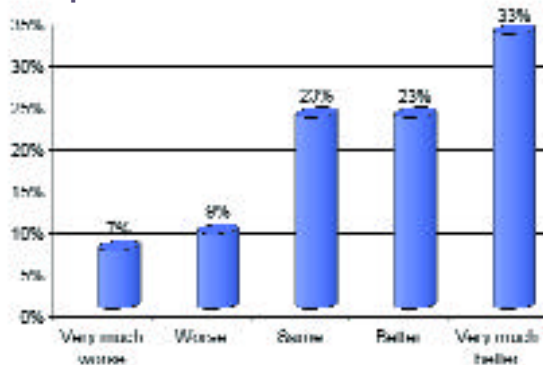


Awareness of health issues

Women also see themselves as more aware of health issues, and better informed, than their mothers' generation. Over 80 per cent say that they are more likely to take the initiative in looking for health information themselves, and more likely to seek early treatment for illnesses and health problems.

It is also interesting to note that 79 percent of women in our survey said that their general health and well-being had either stayed the same or improved since the onset of menopause.

Health and wellbeing since the onset of the menopause



Although they have less 'blind faith' in doctors than their mothers, fiftysomething women also say that doctors themselves have become more understanding about women's health problems, and that there is now much greater openness in discussing, for example, gynaecological issues.

"People died of 'unknown' things which was probably cancer, but nobody said the word. Things are much more open now and it's so much easier to find out more."

"Our mothers might also have known what they had got, but they would never have let on to the doctor. They never wanted to bother the doctor because he was God."

"We won't necessarily accept what we are told."

"Years ago, if you went to a doctor with any woman's problem, you were classified as being a typical over-reactive woman."

"You never heard women discussing gynae issues. They just referred to it as having 'problems down below' and if a child came in the room it was all hush. Ridiculous."

"In my mother's day, she would have believed what the doctor said blindly. It was fact because the doctor had said it. Now, we're much more likely to question it. We're better informed or we'll go and get a second opinion."

Life expectancy for women

1951 - 70.9 yrs 1997 - 79.6 yrs

Fitness

Although generally healthier, fiftysomething women do not see themselves as being fitter than women of their age in the 1950s, despite being more likely to join a gym or consciously 'take exercise'. Quite the opposite: women say that people fifty years ago were physically fitter than now, as work was more physically demanding, people spent less time watching television and more time walking, working in their gardens or allotments, cycling, etc. For women in particular, running a home - washing, cooking, shopping, cleaning, etc. - involved much more physical exercise than it does now.

"Their daily lives were hard work, and it kept them fit. They walked a lot more to shops and things whereas we just jump in the car. In fact, we're probably less active."

"People didn't come home from work and just put the television on. They grew a lot more of their own food. My father had two allotments and would be there every night."

"They had a baking day, a washing day, an ironing day..."

"I remember my mother having to do the washing by scrubbing clothes in a deep tub then using a mangle."

Nowadays, women say that keeping fit seems to be an extra task, for which it can be difficult to find time, rather than part of everyday life.

"I think fitness now is streamlined, cos you haven't got time, so you go to the gym twice a week to cram it all in, in a short space of time."

Diet and healthy eating

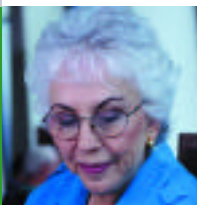
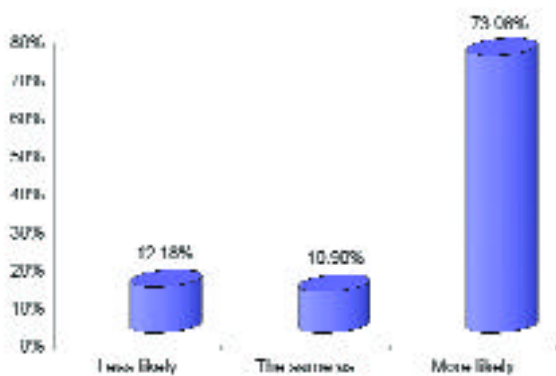
On the question of diet and 'healthy eating', however, opinion among fiftysomething women in our focus groups was more divided: some believe that today's diets are healthier, while others think that their mothers' generation had a more healthy diet.

"It was post war so they filled up on masses of potatoes and things - suet pudding, etc. A completely different way of eating. Everything was fried."

"They had a much healthier diet, more vegetables. It was after the war and people have never been as healthy as they were then."

The survey results were less equivocal, with about three quarters of women saying that they were more likely to follow a healthy diet than women of their age in the 1950s, and only 12 per cent saying that their diet was less healthy than that of their mothers' generation.

Diet compared to women their age in the 1950s



Judith Hann
Science
Journalist

"I decided to use HRT several years ago. Not because the side-effects of the menopause were a real problem for me, but because I'd read the medical research showing the benefits of HRT and its potential to reduce the risk of heart disease and strokes as well as osteoporosis.

The menopause is a major part of a woman's life, impacting hugely on their health and their lives in general – it really needs to be proactively managed. Of course to do this they need the right information and this fascinating report and the Choices Campaign are important tools in helping to improve women's understanding of the menopause and the pros and cons of treatments such as HRT. This can only help women to make informed choices – the right choices for them."

Judith Hann is one of Britain's leading science journalists and broadcasters and is known to millions for the 20 years she spent presenting BBC's *Tomorrow's World*. She has written a number of books on a range of science and health-related subjects. Her most recent publication, 'How Science Works', has become an international best-seller, having been translated into over twenty languages and selling over one million copies worldwide. Judith has a degree in Zoology and Botany, and was recently appointed to sit on the Government's Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission (AEBC) - set up to give advice on future scientific developments in agriculture, including the genetic modification of crops and farm animals.



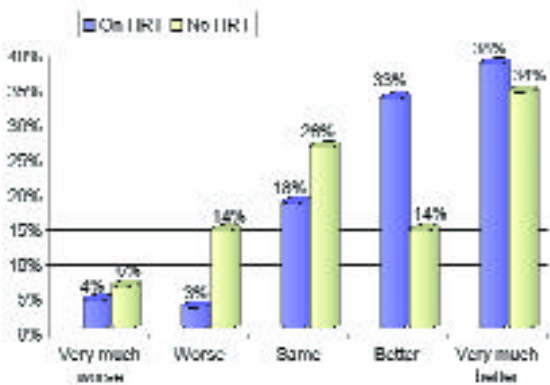
HRT AND THE HRHS

Perhaps the most striking findings of this study were the revelations about the positive effects of the menopause on the lives of many women. Not only are the majority of women not hindered in any way by the onset of menopause, but every aspect of their lives - health, work, sex, career, relationships, travel, interests, energy, happiness - seems to improve.

Among these very positive, active, menopausal women, the focus-group and survey research also revealed a group who may be regarded as something of an 'elite' - well-informed, independent-minded women who have chosen to take HRT to relieve the unpleasant symptoms of the menopause and/or to prevent osteoporosis. The majority of women in the survey reported improvements in areas such as relationships, careers, sex life and general health and well-being since the onset of their menopause, but the women taking HRT reported significantly greater improvements in all these aspects of life.

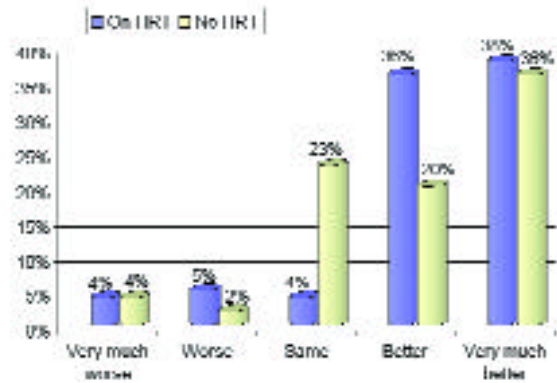
In terms of overall health and well-being, 71 per cent of women on HRT report improvements since the menopause, compared with 48 per cent of those not on HRT.

Health & well-being



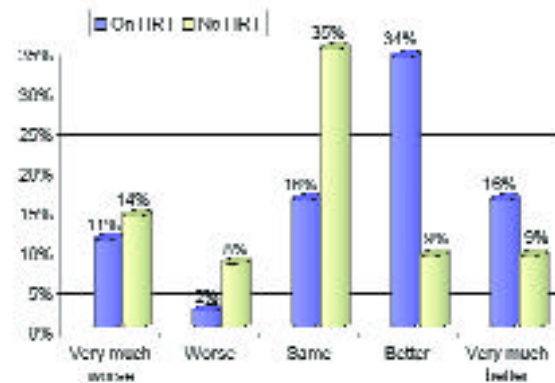
For 74 per cent of women on HRT, relationships with partners and family had improved, compared with 56 per cent of those not on HRT.

Partner/family relationships



Women on HRT were more than twice as likely to say that their sex lives had got 'better' or 'very much better' than women not taking HRT. Fifty per cent of women on HRT reported improvement in their sex lives since the onset of menopause, compared with just 18 per cent of those not taking HRT.

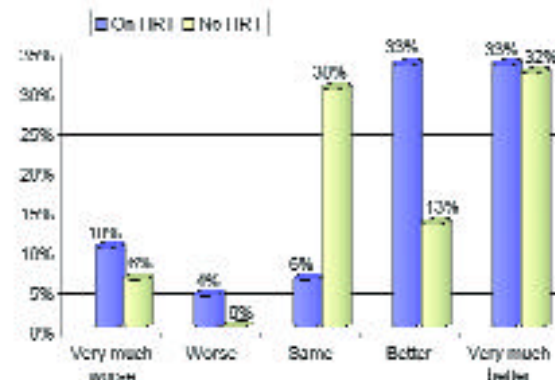
Sex life



These were the most striking results, but differences in other areas were also significant.

Working lives, for example, also seemed to be positively affected by HRT: 66 per cent of women on HRT said that their ability to continue work and pursue a career had improved since the menopause, compared with 45 per cent of those not taking HRT.

Ability to work/pursue careers



Only 11% of menopausal women in Britain currently take HRT. In our focus groups, the women on HRT did not see the menopause as an 'illness', but just as they might have taken the Pill for birth control, they regard HRT as a sensible means of alleviating the more distressing symptoms of the menopause, such as night sweats, and preventing future problems such as osteoporosis.

The members of this new elite like to feel fully in control, in charge of their bodies rather than at the mercy of hormonal swings. Their children have left home; they have more money and time to spend on themselves; they have careers, interests, aspirations and the energy and enthusiasm to pursue new goals. They are determined to rule their own lives, and tend to be somewhat effusive about the benefits of HRT. In our research-notes shorthand, we took to calling this distinctive new aristocracy the HRHs - for 'Hormone-Rich and Happy'.

"I was pre-menopausal with no energy. I had to drag myself around like a dead cat and couldn't figure out what it was. Within six weeks of being on the HRT, I was completely remade."

"It changes your life."

"My GP persuaded me to take it and honestly, within a week I felt better. I was really happy on it. It helped me through a difficult patch."

"It lets you get on with your life again."

It is interesting to note that although the HRHs are enthusiastic about their own experience with HRT, they are not 'evangelistic'. They believe in other women's independence as well as their own, and see taking HRT as very much a personal choice - although some did say that more women would probably make this choice if they were better informed.

Many HRHs had initially been sceptical about HRT themselves, because of concerns about possible side-effects, and a degree of reluctance to 'medicalize' a natural process, but found the symptoms of menopause so debilitating - particularly the night sweats - that they reconsidered, read up on the subject and consulted their GPs.

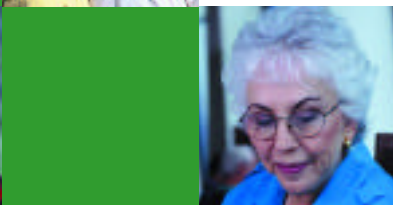
"Initially I was against it because I felt we were like the first generation of women on it for long periods and we were the first generation on the Pill. But having gone on it, it was brilliant."

LYNN DAVIS CASE STUDY

"I first started taking HRT seven years ago for my awful night sweats. They were terrible - I was waking up in the night soaked through. So I went to my GP and he prescribed HRT and within days I felt like a different person. The night sweat stopped and I had more energy. I hadn't realised that I was lacking energy before then as I think it tends to build up gradually and you get used to it. But when I went on HRT I felt like I had a new lease of life.

A couple of years ago my GP took me off HRT because of migraines, and I decided to try alternatives for my night sweats and hot flushes. I tried everything from soya to red clover, but nothing worked. I went back to my GP, weighed up the pros and cons and decided to go back on HRT. Almost immediately I felt so much better. It's also helped me cope with work and family better. A couple of years ago my husband Peter and I took over the management of a country hotel in Wales and at the time I wasn't on HRT and felt exhausted. The long hours were a real struggle. Now I'm back on HRT I feel happier, healthier and more able to cope with the demands of our life."

Lynn Davis, 55, from Wales





"I felt so distressed with the night sweats. I couldn't sleep, I was crying. It was awful."

"I used to wake up and think here it comes, that horrible sinking into depths. Whether it was depression or the menopause, who knows - but the HRT has helped to balance me. I feel a lot more level."

"There's a lot of huff and puff about 'medicalizing' but the way I look at it, it's really no different from taking the Pill. Getting pregnant is 'natural', but we don't want it, so we take the Pill. Same with the menopause. I'm sure the night sweats and all that are very 'natural', and so is getting osteoporosis, but no thank you. I'd rather take HRT."

"Right, and what's so natural about a hip replacement, which is what my mother ended up with? Perhaps if she'd had HRT her bones would have been OK."

ITS NOT ALL JUBILATION...

While the findings of this report are great news for women individually, things still aren't perfect for women as a group. They are still hugely under represented in senior management positions in the workplace, they are still receiving less pay than men in equivalent positions and, despite bringing in a much greater proportion of house-hold income than ever before, they are still doing by far and away the lion's share of housework.

CAROL HARRISON

Best known for her role as Tiffany's sexy mother in the soap EastEnders, Carol Harrison has made time in her busy schedule to support the HRT Aware Choices campaign, striving for better education about managing the menopause and the choices available.

After leaving EastEnders Carol's health suddenly became an issue and coupled with an underactive thyroid, she was diagnosed by the doctor as being peri-menopausal.

"When I heard the word menopause it really upset me as I thought I was no longer a proper women anymore. The doctor suggested that I start taking HRT and that's when I noticed a real change. At first, like many others I had the notion that I should let 'nature' take its course. Then I thought why should I put up with it if I have a choice? We are lucky that we do have the choice, which our mothers never did. I remember my mother going through the menopause and really suffering and feeling a sense of helplessness.

Since taking control over my health I feel great. I've realised that this is the start of another chapter in my life that I intend to enjoy!"



CONCLUSIONS

Despite some caveats, the overwhelming message emerging from the findings of this study is a remarkably positive one: for many of today's women, life really does begin at 50.

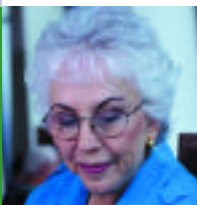
- Most fiftysomething women today feel that they have **more choices** in everything from work to relationships to leisure pursuits, **more independence, more freedom, better health** and **more fun** than women of the same age 50 years ago.
- The most striking perceived change has been in women's financial, social and psychological independence, but the women in the study also emphasised **improvements in health and in relationships** (particularly with their children), which are seen as being much more open and equal.
- Perhaps more surprisingly, all aspects of these women's lives - health, work, sex, career, relationships, travel, interests, energy, happiness - seem to improve after the onset of the menopause.
- This is particularly evident among women taking HRT, where the perceived improvement in sex-life, careers, relationships, health and well-being is significantly higher.
- The research revealed a **new 'elite'** - nicknamed the HRHs (Hormone-Rich and Happy) - well-informed women who have chosen to take HRT, are benefiting from these improvements, and feel more in control of their lives.
- HRHs are currently a mainly middle-class, educated minority. Although they are not 'evangelistic' about HRT, they feel that all women should be better informed about the choices available to them.

Although most fiftysomething women today see themselves as generally enjoying better health, more freedom and more

independence than women in the 1950s, there are some new concerns, reflecting changing times and new problems.

- Ironically, given the current emphasis on healthy lifestyles and living longer, one **major new worry is longevity** itself. Fiftysomething women are much more concerned about quality of life than quantity. Quality of life for these women is defined mainly in terms of independence: they do not want to grow old enough to become dependent. They are worried about looking after their elderly parents, and they do not want their children to have the same worries.
- Another significant new problem is the **'culture of fear'**, fuelled by constant media scares, and the risk-aversion and litigiousness that seem to have become defining features of contemporary society. Women are concerned about the increasing restrictions on people's freedoms (particularly children's) imposed by fears about safety, and about what is seen as an associated breakdown of trust and 'neighbourliness'.
- Partly because they have more choices, many fiftysomething women feel that life is nowadays **more complicated**, and **more stressful**, than it was for their mothers' generation. This is particularly evident in the difficulties of balancing home and work commitments. Women still do most of the housework and childcare, even when they are 'equal' breadwinners - and working practices are still far from being family-friendly.
- Fiftysomething women feel that there is much **more social pressure** on them to maintain an unrealistically youthful appearance than there was for their mothers' generation, who were allowed to 'grow old gracefully'.

These concerns should not, however, be allowed to overshadow the more important, and perhaps surprising, positive findings of this study. The key message seems to be that many women are beginning a new life at 50, and that for most women, the menopause can now be a positive, liberating experience. Instead of dreading 'the change', the study shows that many women can look forward to enjoying better relationships, more energy, more interests, more travel opportunities, better working life, better health, more freedom - oh, and better sex.





METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted in three stages:

- Desk and library research, including a review of social history and social science literature on women's issues now and in the 1950s.
- Qualitative research: a series focus groups and interviews with women in their 50s, involving detailed discussion of their lifestyles, health, attitudes, interests and aspirations - and inviting comparisons with their mothers' generation.
- Quantitative research: data from the focus groups and interviews provided the basis for a national survey, in which a representative sample of 200 women aged 50-64 were asked to compare their lifestyles, attitudes, choices, etc. with those of their mothers' generation. They were also asked about the differences in their own lives before and after the onset of the menopause.

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ABOUT THE CHOICES CAMPAIGN

The Choices Campaign was launched in 2000 by HRT Aware to highlight the choices available to women going through the menopause. It aims to highlight the choices available to women so that they don't just have to "put up with" the symptoms of the menopause, but can make an informed choice about the treatments available to them.

ABOUT HRT AWARE

HRT Aware is an industry supported organisation that aims to provide a central source of media information to increase the understanding of the benefits and risks of HRT for the relief of menopausal symptoms.

The organisation aims to proactively create a positive environment for the dissemination of information on the menopause and its management.

ABOUT SIRC

The Social Issues Research Centre is an independent, non-profit organisation founded to conduct research on social, health and lifestyle issues, monitor and assess global sociocultural trends and provide new insights on human behaviour and social relations.

WHERE CAN WOMEN GET ADVICE

Send for a Choices Campaign leaflet at PO Box 28428, London, N19 5WZ

Or contact the Menopause Amarant Trust helpline on 01293 413000 to speak to a menopause nurse.

If you would like more information about HRT Aware and the Choices Campaign please contact Sally Scorer at the RED Consultancy on 020 74657721 email: sally.scorer@redconsultancy.com