

UNDERSTANDING AND IMPROVING WOMEN'S HEALTH IN AGING

Launched in 1994, the Study of Women's Health Across the Nation (SWAN), was originally designed to better understand the menopause transition. It has since shifted beyond menopause to learn how mid-life experiences affect health and quality of life during aging overall. SWAN follows more than 3,300 women in the United States at seven research centers, including the University of Pittsburgh.

"We're trying to understand whether there are ways we could start earlier to improve later life health outcomes," says **Maria Mori Brooks**, principal investigator of the SWAN coordinating center. "It's not only length of life but also quality of life."

Brooks is a professor of epidemiology and of biostatistics in the School of Public Health who plays an integral role in designing the visit protocols, how each site collects data and the statistical analysis of those data. Each visit focuses on general themes of aging and the role of menopause, but the data collection varies.

"From each visit, we may get information from questionnaires about vasomotor symptoms, bone density scans or daily hormone levels," says Brooks. "We've had challenges and fun working with all the data and trying to make sense out of what happens as women age."

As a longitudinal cohort study, researchers are not assessing one specific intervention like they would in a clinical trial. Instead, they use all the data collected to depict the changes that happen in this transitional period in a woman's life and to evaluate the risk factors and consequences of specific health outcomes such as poor sleep patterns.



It's not only length of life
but also **quality of life.**"

—Maria Mori Brooks

Though commonly seen in a negative light, there are both positive and negative aspects to the aging process. While physical function declines as you age, SWAN also found that depressive symptoms decrease and overall mental health increases. Knowing about these changes is key for women to understand what is happening to their bodies as they age.

From these results, SWAN aims to help women know what changes during menopause and aging are typical and what changes may benefit from interventions.

"In the 30 years since it began, SWAN has gone from a menopause study to an aging study," says Brooks. "But the overall goal has not changed, we want to better understand and improve women's health." ■

