Nutrition during Menopause

The Menopause is the time of change in a woman’s life marking the end of fertility, usually occurring between the ages of 45-55 years. The level of the hormone oestrogen in the body falls which can cause symptoms such as weight gain, hot flushes, night sweats, irritability, mood swings, poor concentration, frequent headaches, joint pains or irregular periods.

Before menopause, women are protected against a number of diseases by oestrogen such as heart disease and osteoporosis. The changes that occur during the menopause due to the loss of oestrogen can increase the risk of heart disease and bone weakness.

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is used to control the symptoms for many women but some cannot take HRT due to other health problems and others choose not to take it due to the increased risk of certain cancers by using HRT.

Nutrition and lifestyle also has an important role to play in the management of menopausal symptoms. The menopause is a time to look after yourself by making healthier lifestyle choices to make this mid-life transition easier.

Weight Gain
With the hormonal changes of menopause & the natural aging process, women often lose muscle and gain fat. Lifestyle factors are also key players in weight gain during the menopause. Weight gain during the menopause can increase the risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes and various types of cancers, including colorectal cancer and breast cancer. Menopausal weight gain can be challenging and there are no quick fixes when it comes to weight loss but being careful about making healthy food choices and doing more physical activity can make a real difference:

Be physically active
Adults should do at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise most days of the week. Thirty minutes of fast walking a day could result in around 7kg (15lb) weight loss in a year & reduce the risk of heart disease. Physical activity also helps to reduce and prevent menopausal symptoms, such as sleep disturbances, insomnia, joint pain, anxiety, irritability, depression & hot flushes. Remember that you can be active doing daily activities – try taking the stairs; parking further away from your destination and walking; gardening; or dancing.

Eat Right
- Aim to include five fruits and vegetables every day
- Eat some fibre every day – oats, wholegrain cereals and breads as well as pulses like lentils chickpeas and beans are all excellent sources
- Choose lean cuts of meat, trim off any excess fat from meat and avoid processed meat products
• Aim for at least two portions of oily fish every week. Oily fish includes: tinned sardines, mackerel, salmon, fresh tuna, trout and herring
• Eat less foods which are high in fat and sugar such as crisps, pastries, cakes and biscuits
• Try to avoid oversized portions – using a smaller plate, bowl and glass can help
• Switch to oils and fats that are high in unsaturated fat such as rapeseed, olive & sunflower oils/spreads
• Choose skimmed or reduced-fat dairy products
• Grill rather than fry foods whenever possible
• Try cutting down on salt by avoiding too many processed foods such as ready meals and cooking sauces
• When eating out choose lower calorie menu options that include vegetables, fruits & whole-grains

Bone Health
From the age of about 35, there is a slow loss of calcium from the bone in both men and women. During the menopause, this calcium loss increases because of the loss of oestrogen. In time, the bones can become weak and break easily which can increase your risk of fracturing a bone such as your hip or wrist.
Calcium is an essential nutrient for bone health. Try to aim for 3 portions of calcium-rich foods every day which can include: a third of a pint/ 200ml semi skimmed milk, a matchbox sized slice of cheese or a yoghurt.
Vitamin D is also very important for bone health. It is made in the skin between the months of April and October. Women over the age of 65 or who have low sunlight exposure should consider taking a vitamin D supplement of 10 µg per day. Foods that contain vitamin D include oily fish, fortified margarine and cereals, butter, red meat and eggs.
Weight-bearing activity also helps your bones to hold on to the minerals that keep them dense and strong. This prevents or slows down the progress of osteoporosis while also improving your balance and co-ordination.

Heart Health
During the menopause a woman’s risk of getting heart disease goes up to the same level of a man of the same age. Following a healthy balanced diet and regular physical activity can help to reduce the risk of heart disease.

What about Plant Oestrogens?
Some women choose to eat foods or take supplements containing plant oestrogens to help relieve symptoms. Plant oestrogens are a group of substances found in plant foods such as soya and red clover. They are similar, but much weaker than human oestrogen. It is thought that if they are eaten regularly they may have positive health benefits including reducing hot flushes and reducing blood cholesterol levels. More research is needed before the benefits of taking these substances are proven but it may be helpful to include more plant oestrogen-rich foods in your diet. These include calcium-enriched soya products like milk, yoghurts and desserts and soya and linseed breads.
Take a Lifestyle Approach:
Lifestyle changes may help women to reduce menopausal symptoms, keep bone density and reduce risk of heart disease. In addition to eating healthily, you should:
• Keep to sensible alcohol limits – no more than 11 standard drinks per week and ensure to include some alcohol free days (1 standard drink = 1 pub measure of spirits/half a pint of beer/small glass of wine/an alcopop)
• Take regular moderate exercise, and especially weight bearing activity and resistance training
• Limit to a moderate intake of caffeine from drinks like coffee, tea and cola
• Sleep in a cool room
• Dress in layers to allow easy temperature control
• Develop effective ways of dealing with stress and learn to relax

Summary:
Changes in your diet and lifestyle can help you manage the symptoms of the menopause. Be sure to take this time to look at what you eat and try to get the balance right. Exercising regularly and eating a healthy balanced diet including plenty of fruit and vegetables, oily fish and low in saturated fat will protect your heart and bones and prevent weight gain during the menopause while also helping to relieve difficult menopausal symptoms.


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