

## Menopause

The menopause (the time in a woman's life when periods stop) usually happens between the ages of 45-55 years. This Fact Sheet will look at how your diet can help relieve some of the symptoms.

### What happens to your body

As well as a loss of fertility, other physical changes may happen including an increase in blood pressure, changes in cholesterol levels and weakening of the bone.

These symptoms are mainly due to falling oestrogen levels, and can last for just a few months or for several years. The range of symptoms and how severe they are, can be different for each woman. Early symptoms can include weight gain, hot flushes, night sweats, irritability, poor concentration, frequent headaches and joint pains and irregular or heavy periods. Over the long-term, loss of oestrogen increases 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. Instead, some women make diet and lifestyle changes to try and gain relief from symptoms. This can include taking dietary supplements in place of hormone therapy.

### Weight gain

During the menopause muscle mass goes down and this means that less calories may be needed. Over time this can lead to weight gain. Being careful about energy intake and doing more physical activity can make a real difference. Thirty minutes fast walking a day could lead to around 7kg (15lb) weight loss in a year, and reduce the risk of heart disease.

### Bone health

From the age of about 35, there is a slow loss of calcium from the bone in both men and women. However, this calcium loss increases during menopause because of the loss of oestrogen. This is more common in women who are not on HRT, as HRT contains oestrogen. Many nutrients help to keep bones healthy, so it's important that the diet is balanced. You can do this by choosing a variety of foods from the four main food groups, in particular, eating plenty of fruit and vegetables and foods from the milk and dairy group as these foods provide calcium. For most women this would mean aiming for two to three portions of calcium-rich foods every day which can include: a third of a pint/200ml semi skimmed milk, a matchbox size piece of cheese, a small yoghurt or a milk-based pudding like custard or rice pudding.

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 mcg per day.

Foods that contain vitamin D include: oily fish, cod liver oil, fortified margarine and cereals, butter, red meat and eggs.

### Heart health

It is thought that during the menopause a woman's risk of getting heart disease goes up to the same level of a man of the same age. There are some simple changes you can make to reduce the risk.

- Eat less saturated and trans fats, choosing foods that contain 'heart-friendly' fats such as spreads made from olive or rapeseed oil, and include avocados, nuts, oily fish.
- Cut down on fatty meat products, choose lean cuts of meat, trim off any excess fat from meat, remove the skin from chicken, duck and turkey and avoid processed meat products.

- Cut back on fats and oils high in saturates such as lard, ghee, butter palm and coconut oil.
- Use oils and fats that are high in unsaturated fat (monounsaturates and polyunsaturates), such as rapeseed, olive and sunflower oils/spreads. But only use them in small amounts or opt for lower fat spreads. All oils are a concentrated source of calories as they are 100% fat.
- Choose semi-skimmed, 1% or skimmed milk, opt for low or reduced-fat dairy products and go easy with creamy/cheesy sauces.
- Grill rather than fry foods whenever possible.
- Reduce your intake of processed foods such as crisps, biscuits and pies.
- Cut down on salt by avoiding too many processed foods such as ready meals and cooking sauces. Cooking from scratch allows you to use different ingredients to flavour dishes such as herbs and spices.
- Aim for at least two portions of fish every week one which should be oily. Oily fish includes: canned sardines, mackerel, salmon, fresh tuna, trout and herrings.
- Eat a minimum of five different coloured fruits and vegetables – all types can count (fresh, frozen, canned, dried or juiced).
- Eat some fibre every day – oats, wholegrain cereals and breads as well as pulses like lentils, chickpeas and beans are all excellent sources.

## What about plant oestrogens?

Some women choose to eat foods or take supplements containing plant oestrogens to help with symptoms. Plant oestrogens are a group of substances found in plant foods such as soy 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 improving levels of fat in the blood.

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 or a red clover supplement.

## A lifestyle approach

Changing lifestyle may help women to reduce menopausal symptoms, keep bone density and reduce risk of heart disease. Alongside eating healthily, you should:

- Aim for two to three portions of calcium-rich foods every day.
- Moderate intake of caffeine from drinks like coffee, tea and colas or choose decaffeinated drinks if you are sensitive to its stimulatory effects.
- Keep to sensible alcohol limits – no more than 2-3 units per day or avoid altogether if you feel it makes symptoms worse.
- Do some weight bearing activity.
- If you think you might want to take nutritional supplements speak to your doctor.

## Summary

Changes in your diet and lifestyle can help you manage the symptoms of the menopause. Exercise, plenty of fruit and vegetables, fibre and a reduction in salt and saturated fat will protect your heart and prevent weight gain. If you want to try HRT or a dietary supplement then speak to your doctor.

### Further information:

Food Fact Sheets on other topics including Vitamin D, Heart Health, Calcium. Omega-3 and Supplements are available at [www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts](http://www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts)

The Menopause Exchange  
[www.menopause-exchange.co.uk/](http://www.menopause-exchange.co.uk/)

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