



Diet, Lifestyle and the Menopause



The menopause is a time of great change for women, usually occurring between the ages of 45-55 years, and signalling an end to the fertile years.

Menopausal symptoms are primarily due to falling oestrogen levels, and may last for just a few months or linger for several years. Symptoms differ between women, but can include weight gain, hot flushes, night sweats, irritability, poor concentration, more frequent headaches and joint pains, reduced sex drive, vaginal dryness. Over the long-term, the changes that occur during the menopause can significantly increase the risk of coronary heart disease and the rate of calcium loss from bones.

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is a very effective approach to controlling menopausal symptoms but the pros and cons must be carefully weighed due to the increase risk of certain cancers which can be increased by using HRT.

However, many women are focusing on nutrition and lifestyle as their preferred treatment for symptom relief. With or without HRT, nutrition and lifestyle has an important role to play in the treatment of menopausal symptoms.

It's advisable to follow any changes for at least three months to allow the full potential benefits to be seen.

Weight Gain

Unless certain exercises are maintained to prevent muscle loss, there is a slow but significant reduction in lean muscle tissue during the menopause, which can result in a reduced requirement for energy (calories). This can add up over time and lead to gradual weight gain. Being overweight is known to make menopausal symptoms, such as hot flushes, worse. Moderating energy intake and increasing energy expenditure through daily physical activity can make a real difference. Thirty minutes extra brisk walking a day could lead to around 7kg (15lb) weight loss in a year, and significantly reduce the risk of heart disease. For top tips on safe effective weight control see www.bdaweightwise.com

Bone Health

From the age of about 35, there is a slow loss in bone in both men and women. However, during menopause, reduced oestrogen levels causes an increased loss of calcium from bones. This is more common in menopausal women who are not on HRT, as HRT replaces oestrogen.

Many nutrients help keep bones healthy, so it's important that the diet is balanced with plenty of fruit and vegetables and adequate calcium. Aim for 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 such as custard or rice pudding.

Vitamin D, which we can manufacture in the skin from sunlight, is also important for bone health and women who have low sunlight exposure may need to consider taking a Vitamin D supplement. Women who have been diagnosed with osteoporosis may be prescribed a bone health supplement.

Heart Health

It's estimated that at menopause a woman's risk of developing heart disease increases to that of a similarly-aged man's. Seven out of 10 post-menopausal women have high blood cholesterol which is a risk factor for heart disease (1). There are some very simple lifestyle changes you can make for protection.

- ♦ Reduce the amount of total fat you eat, and choose heart-friendly fats like olive oil, rapeseed and soya oil more often.
- ♦ Cut down on salt by trying to cook from scratch more often and choosing lower salt options of processed foods. Try to reduce how much salt you add when cooking and at the table. Reducing your salt intake may also help reduce fluid retention.
- ♦ Aim for two portions of oily fish every week. Canned sardines, mackerel and salmon are all fine and fresh tuna, trout or herrings are great sources of heart-friendly omega-3 fats.
- ♦ Eat a minimum of five different coloured fruits and vegetables for fantastic antioxidant protection - all types can count (fresh, frozen, canned, dried or juiced).
- ♦ Eat some fibre providers every day - oats, wholegrain cereals and breads as well as pulses such as lentils, chickpeas and beans are all excellent.

What about plant oestrogens?

Plant oestrogens are a group of substances found, as the name suggests, in plant foods. They are structurally similar, but far weaker than human oestrogen. If eaten regularly, plant oestrogens or isoflavones may have positive health benefits including helping to reduce blood cholesterol levels.

They may also reduce some menopausal symptoms, especially hot flushes or vasomotor symptoms. The link between plant oestrogens and symptom relief is being heavily researched at the moment.

Although we don't yet fully understand all of the potential

benefits, and more research is needed, 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. Women who have severe hot flushes and night sweats may see the most benefit. But it can take up to four months of including three portions of plant oestrogen rich foods every day to make a noticeable difference.

What else can I do?

Other lifestyle changes which can help relieve menopausal symptoms include:

- ♦ moderating your intake of caffeine by cutting down on tea, coffee and cola drinks
- ♦ sleep in a well-ventilated room and use lightweight bedding
- ♦ wear cotton clothing and dress in layers which can easily be removed
- ♦ take some time to be "kind to yourself" - massage, yoga and long baths are all excellent ways of taking some relaxation time

A lifestyle approach to the menopause

Changing lifestyle may help women to reduce menopausal symptoms, maintain bone density and reduce risk of heart disease.

- ♦ Eat a healthy diet, including at least five portions of different coloured fruit and vegetables everyday
- ♦ Aim for three to four portions of calcium-rich foods every day
- ♦ If you seldom go out in the sun, you should ensure you get adequate vitamin D in your diet, such as from oily fish, or take a supplement.
- ♦ Eat a good mixture of fibre providers

- ♦ Moderate intake of stimulants such as coffee or alcohol
- ♦ Look after your heart by eating oily types of fish twice a week and limiting salt and saturated fats
- ♦ If you enjoy them, it may be helpful to regularly eat foods rich in plant oestrogens
- ♦ Maintain or take steps to achieve a healthy body weight - www.bdaweightwise.com
- ♦ Sleep in a cool room
- ♦ Develop effective ways of dealing with stress and learn to relax
- ♦ Take regular moderate exercise, and especially weight bearing activity and resistance training to maintain lean body mass
- ♦ Dress in layers to allow easy temperature control
- ♦ If you think you might need to take nutritional supplements - get some advice

Useful addresses

Menopause Exchange

The menopause exchange is an unfunded organisation offering unbiased information and support for menopausal women:

The Menopause Exchange
PO Box 205, Bushey
Herts WD23 1ZS
Tel. 020 8420 7245
e-mail: norma@menopause-exchange.co.uk

Menopause Matters

Menopause matters is an informative website and provides up to date information about menopause treatments as well as general support or women experiencing the menopause. There is also a quarterly magazine which members can subscribe to: www.menopausematters.co.uk