

caring for you: menopause

The menopause is a natural part of aging that occurs as a woman's oestrogen levels decline and her periods stop. Due to the fall in oestrogen women can experience a range of symptoms, which may impact on health and wellbeing. Eating well and keeping active are beneficial for all ages, and can be particularly helpful with managing symptoms of the menopause.

maintaining a healthy weight

There are many myths and misconceptions around weight and menopause. Many women are concerned about the onset, fearing that they will naturally gain weight or that it will become harder to lose weight. The good news is that there's little evidence to suggest that the menopause should be a direct cause of weight gain or an inability to lose weight. Some women do see an increase in weight during middle age, typically around the same time of menopause, but this is thought to be primarily due to change in lifestyle and a gradual decrease in physical activity, not necessarily

due to menopause itself. Enjoying a healthy, balanced diet and incorporating regular activity into your daily routine can help you manage your weight.

Becoming more active can not only help with weight management by helping you burn more calories, it also helps preserve muscle tissue which typically starts to decline around this time, which then helps maintain your metabolic rate.



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spiced salmon with mango couscous

eating well

Eating a varied, well-balanced diet during the menopause is beneficial to overall health, as it is at any time of life. Satisfy your appetite with a variety of healthy, nutritious foods, such as fruit and vegetables; lean meat, poultry, fish and meat replacements; low-fat dairy; and carbohydrate-rich foods such as potatoes, rice, pasta and other grains. Enjoy a limited intake of high-fat and high-sugar foods such as cakes, pastries, biscuits, chocolate and crisps.

Ensuring that you get all the essential nutrients during menopause is important to consider at this time:

calcium

The importance of calcium in bone health, particularly in maintaining bone strength as we age, has been the subject of much research. It's recommended that women consume plenty of calcium during the menopause¹ alongside adopting an active lifestyle to help ensure that bones remain as strong as possible. Bones become weaker as we age due to the gradual loss of calcium from the bone structure over time and particularly during menopause. Oestrogen helps maintain bone strength by preventing the loss of calcium, but levels of oestrogen fall during menopause causing women to start losing calcium from bones at a faster rate. This increases the risk of osteoporosis whereby bones become so weak and brittle they easily break.

The main dietary sources of calcium are dairy products such as milk, cheese and yogurt. If you're concerned about your weight or looking to lose weight, a simple swap can be to choose low-fat options of dairy products, such as skimmed milk, which still contain plenty of calcium. Other foods which provide calcium include calcium-fortified dairy alternatives (such as soya drink and yogurt), tofu, some green leafy vegetables like kale, watercress and rocket, fish where the bones are eaten (eg sardines), and chia seeds.

Extra calcium from supplements has not been shown to have much effect on bone loss during the menopause. However, supplements may be of more benefit in later stages – some studies have found that calcium supplements slowed the loss of bone in women five years post-menopause.^{2,3} If you're concerned about your calcium intake and are considering taking supplements it's important to discuss this with your GP.

vitamin D

Vitamin D is also important for bone health as it helps you absorb calcium from food. Most of our vitamin D is made in the skin when exposed to sunlight. Dietary sources include fortified spreads, meat and oily fish, and these are particularly important for those whose exposure to sunlight is limited. However, as sunlight is mainly relied on to produce vitamin D, and there are few dietary sources, many individuals may be at risk of vitamin D deficiency. As such all adults are recommended to take a 10 micrograms supplement to ensure their intake is adequate between October and March when the skin is unable to produce vitamin D from sunlight. People with limited exposure to sunshine (ie those seldom outdoors, or who cover their skin when outdoors) or those from minority ethnic groups with dark skin, such as those from African, African-Caribbean or South Asian backgrounds, are recommended to consider a daily 10 micrograms supplement throughout the year.

iron

Women's iron requirements decrease at the time of menopause when periods stop. Requirements are then reduced to the same level as men (8.7 micrograms/day). Although there is a reduction in requirements, it is still important to include a variety of sources of iron in the diet. The best sources of iron are lean red meat, poultry and fish. Iron can also be obtained from plant foods such as dark green vegetables, pulses and nuts, although it is not absorbed as well as that from animal sources. Vitamin C increases the absorption of iron from plant foods so it helps to include vitamin C containing foods (such as fruits, salad and green vegetables) within a meal.

heart health

As well as making sure you're looking after your bone health, it's important to look after your heart health too. Women are at a higher risk of developing heart disease post-menopause. Making small, simple changes to the foods you eat and the way you cook can help to reduce your risk.

- Cut down on saturated fats – such as lard, ghee and coconut oil; choose lean cuts of meat; opt for low or reduced-fat dairy products (including skimmed/semi-skimmed milk, and low fat yogurt); grill or bake rather than fry foods where you can; reduce your intake of high-fat foods such as crisps, biscuits, cakes and pies.
- Include small amounts of mono- and polyunsaturated fats and oils – such as olive oil, rapeseed oil, avocado, unsalted nuts. Government healthy eating guidelines also recommend enjoying two portions of fish each week, one of which should be oily fish such as salmon, herring, and mackerel to help provide a healthy intake of unsaturated oil.
- Eat a variety of colourful fruit and vegetables – aim for at least five portions a day to support your intake of a range of beneficial nutrients.
- Incorporate fibre-rich food into your diet – for instance choosing oats, chickpeas, beans and other pulses, opting for wholegrain versions of bread, pasta and rice, and leaving the skin on potatoes.
- Reduce your salt intake – cooking meals from scratch means you have complete control over what goes into your food. Instead of using salt, add flavour with herbs and spices. So you can enjoy homemade meals more often, and be less tempted by the takeaway menu when you're short of time, get into the habit of batch cooking meals when you can – leftovers can be a lifesaver on busy days and they'll save you money too.
- Limit your alcohol intake – some women find alcohol can trigger menopause symptoms such as hot flushes and night sweats⁴, so you may find it beneficial to cut down. Drinking alcohol can also lead to poor sleep, contribute to weight gain and increase blood pressure (which increases the risk of heart attack, stroke and type 2 diabetes)⁵, and it's linked to a higher risk of developing osteoporosis. To help reduce your intake, you could try making longer drinks using sugar-free mixers, such as a white wine spritzer, or having water or a soft drink in between each alcoholic drink. These are also good choices to support weight loss or to help with weight maintenance.



phyto-oestrogens

Many women experience a range of symptoms during the menopause such as hot flushes, night sweats, dry skin, poor concentration and mood swings. Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) often helps relieve these symptoms and has been shown to help prevent the development of osteoporosis.

There is ongoing interest in the role of phyto-oestrogens as a more natural alternative to HRT to help alleviate some menopausal symptoms such as hot flushes. Phyto-oestrogens are a group of substances found in plant foods, such as soya beans. They have been found to act in a similar way to oestrogen hormones but have a weaker effect. 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, but more research is needed before the helpful benefits of plant oestrogen are proven.⁶

It's advised that anyone suffering from menopausal symptoms consult their GP to discuss the most appropriate treatment. However, those wishing to try increasing their intake of phyto-oestrogens could include more of the following foods in their diet:

- soya beans
- tofu
- soya drink
- linseed

soba noodles with tofu and mushrooms

Serves 4

Ready in Less than 30 Minutes

Ingredients

400g dried soba noodles

Low-calorie cooking spray

400g firm tofu (plain or naturally smoked),
cut into 2cm cubes

2cm piece root ginger, peeled and grated

4 spring onions, diagonally sliced into 2cm
lengths

1 red chilli, deseeded and finely chopped

2 red peppers, deseeded and thinly sliced

400g shiitake mushrooms, stalks
removed, thickly sliced

1 level tbsp cornflour

2 tbsp dark soy sauce

2 tbsp oyster sauce, dressing style

250ml vegetable stock

100g baby pak choi, halved or quartered

Method

- Cook the noodles according to the packet instructions, then drain and set aside.
- Meanwhile, spray a wok or frying pan with low-calorie cooking spray and place over a high heat. Add the tofu and fry, in batches, for 3-4 minutes or until golden. Remove and drain on kitchen paper.
- Wipe the pan with kitchen paper and lightly re-spray with low calorie cooking spray. Add the ginger, spring onions, red chilli, peppers and mushrooms and stir-fry for 3-4 minutes.
- Mix the cornflour with 2 tablespoons of water and add the soy sauce, oyster sauce and stock. Add to the wok and bring to the boil. Reduce the heat, return the tofu to the wok with the pak choi and simmer gently for 2-3 minutes.
- To serve, divide the noodles between four bowls and spoon over the mushroom and tofu mixture.



soba noodles with tofu & mushrooms

For more recipe and meal ideas, such as our recipe for a
spicy tofu scramble visit [slimmingworld.co.uk](https://www.slimmingworld.co.uk)

keeping active

Government guidelines recommend that we aim to build up to at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity activity at least five times a week to stay fit and healthy and help manage our weight. This can include activities such as walking, swimming and gardening and doesn't have to mean taking part in strenuous sports (unless that's your thing, in which case go for it!). Any activity that makes you feel warmer and speeds up your breathing and heart rate, while still being able to hold a conversation, counts as moderate activity. Including more activity into daily routines all counts, for example:

- taking the stairs instead of the lift
- walking short distances instead of taking the car
- getting on or off the bus one stop further away

Making small and simple changes to your eating and drinking habits as well as aiming to move a bit more can be beneficial during the menopause, particularly with supporting bone and heart health, and it may help relieve some of the symptoms too. In addition to considering your lifestyle, speak to your GP for individualised advice and further information on potential treatments.

references

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