A Menopause Diet for a Healthier, Slimmer and Happier Experience

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Menopause Diet and Foods: What to Eat and Not to Eat

As you approach your late 40s and early 50s, your body begins to go through hormonal changes. Specifically, your ovaries begin to produce less and less progesterone and estrogen.

These changes in your hormone levels bring with it many side effects, including the dreaded hot flashes that 75 percent of women experience. Another side effect, and one that many women don't expect is unexplained changes in their weight.

What Causes Weight Gain During Menopause?

There are several reasons why you might step onto the bathroom scale and be surprised by what you see. The first factor is how estrogen affects your metabolism.

According to researchers, estrogen is one of several hormones that help your body to regulate weight and burn calories. As your estrogen levels decrease, your metabolic rate (the speed that your body converts stored energy into working energy) begins to go down.

With a slower metabolism, your body burns fewer calories throughout the day. That might seem like not a big deal, but little snacks here or there, or an extra helping of dessert at night, might hit your waistline a lot quicker than when you were younger.

During menopause, you also begin to lose muscle mass. By some estimates, you lose anywhere from 3 to 5 percent of your muscle mass every decade after you turn 30, and depleted estrogen levels compound these aging-related changes.

Muscle tissue burns more calories than fat tissue, and losing muscle means your metabolism slows even further.

Finally, as you get older, you may become less physically active.

In summary, these compounding factors mean many women who maintain their same pre-menopause eating habits often see unexpected weight gain as their bodies change.

But it doesn't have to be inevitable.

From foods that raise your estrogen levels to lifestyle changes that battle the bulge, you can use menopause as a time to reset and rethink your diet for a happier and healthier you.

Menopause Diet Ideas to Help With Menopause Naturally

If you want to stay slim as your hormones fluctuate, there is no one-size-fits-all option. Every woman is different, and from genetics to lifestyle, what works for you is dependent on your own body, your own needs, and your own habits.

That being said, there are several key diet patterns and ideas that women have used to maintain a healthy weight during menopause.

The Low-Carb Diet

One study followed 249 post-menopausal women for six months.

They found that going on a low-carb diet helps the women to lose an average of 21 pounds during the six-month period, including a drop of 7 percent in their body fat and a loss of 3.7 inches from around their waist.

When it comes to menopause and carbohydrates, carbohydrates are key when you're younger to help you produce healthy levels of hormones. This is why many women find that going on a low-carb diet when they're younger caused unwanted changes in their ovulation cycle.

Talk to your doctor before making any changes to your diet, especially if you're wondering whether a keto diet (strict elimination of carbs) is good for menopause. Menopause is a unique time in your life and going on a low-carb diet may be helpful in combating menopause-related weight gain, but you need to be aware of how carbs affect hormone levels.

The Paleo Diet

The paleo diet purports to take your diet back to the caveman era, with the idea being that your body has evolved to eat certain prehistoric foods (think less to no grains, more meat, and more whole, unprocessed foods).

A two-year study found that women lost more weight on a paleo diet than on a strictly low-carb diet.

A Plant-Based Diet

Whether you go vegetarian or vegan, multiple studies have found that eliminating meat and animal products from your diet can help post-menopausal women experience significant weight loss while also improving their overall wellbeing.

If going fully plant-based seems like too extreme of a change when you're already going through so much change, ease into it. Start with meatless Mondays (31 percent of Americans go meat-free at least one day a week). Then, as you get used to the benefits and habits of eating plant-based, add more meat-free days to your week.

The Mediterranean Diet

The Mediterranean diet emphasizes plant-based foods with a limited amount of poultry or fish and a focus on herbs, spices and olive oil.

In one study of women ages 55 and older, women who stuck with this eating plan saw significant weight loss, especially around their belly where women often feel the most self-conscious.

This diet has also been linked to reducing hot flashes and other symptoms of menopause.

One condition that many women don't realize is how menopause affects their cardiovascular health. As your estrogen levels go down, your body has a harder time maintaining arteries that are soft and flexible. This can affect your blood flow and, for some reason, increase their risks of heart problems.

The Mediterranean diet, as well as a vegan or vegetarian diet, has been linked to improved cardiovascular health. However, keep in mind that heart health is a serious matter. Talk to your doctor immediately if you feel dizziness, heart palpitations, and other signs of heart health problems.

Estrogen-Friendly Foods to Help With Menopause Naturally

Whatever diet you opt to try for you to experience a happier, healthier menopause, there are several specific fruits, vegetables, supplements and estrogen-rich foods that may help with menopause naturally.

Not only are these foods delicious and helpful when it comes to your hormone levels, but they are also rich in nutrients and fiber to help you maintain a healthier weight.

Calcium-Rich Foods

When you're going through menopause, you need more calcium. That's because the drop in natural estrogen levels increases how fast your bones lose strength and density.

If you're not taking any type of estrogen replacement therapy from your doctor, you need a minimum of 1,200 milligrams of calcium every day. If you're on a hormone replacement therapy, talk to your doctor. You'll likely need approximately 1,000 milligrams of calcium daily.

Many women immediately think of dairy when it comes to boosting their calcium levels, but you might want to rethink that cliche. For many women, eating more dairy can make menopause symptoms like hot flashes worse.

To meet your increasing calcium needs, consider non-dairy alternatives like chia seeds, dark-green leafy vegetables, almonds, and broccoli.

Vitamin D-Rich Foods

Vitamin D is necessary for your body to use estrogen properly. Vitamin D also helps your body to absorb calcium, thus making it a critical menopause-friendly nutrient for maintaining healthy bones during and after menopause.

Some of the best foods for vitamin D include fortified beverages, pink salmon, sardines and the yolk in an egg.

B Vitamins-Rich Foods

Getting enough B vitamins helps boost your energy, which often plummets during menopause, and can also help to regulate menopause-related mood swings. B vitamins can also help with hormone regulation and reducing menopausal stress.

There are several key B vitamins:

- B12: Found in yogurt, organ meat and shellfish
- B6: Found in avocado, banana, and potatoes
- Niacin: Found in mushrooms and whole grains
- Folate: Found in cooked spinach and broccoli
- Riboflavin: Found in cereal, salmon and soy nuts
- Thiamin: Found in beans, peas, and pork

Soy

Check with your doctor to see if soy foods and soy supplements can help. The isoflavones in plant estrogen-rich soy can mimic the effects of estrogen in your body. Some women find that eating more soy or taking a soy supplement helps ease the side effects of menopause and reduce hot flashes.

When it comes to foods, opt for minimally processed soy foods as opposed to overly processed meals like soy burgers. Example foods that are minimally processed include whole soybeans (edamame), miso soup, and tofu.

The extra protein in soy can also help improve your lean muscle mass, boosting your metabolism and reducing menopausal weight gain.

Omega-3 Fatty Acids

Eating a diet rich in omega-3 fats may boost your mood and reduce mood swings, which many women experience when going through menopause. Omega-3s also bring a wide array of additional health benefits, including regulating hormone production, reducing the risk of heart disease, and even keeping your skin moisturized.

One of the richest sources of these healthy fats is fatty, oily fish such as mackerel and salmon.

If you're eating a plant-based diet, consider flaxseed.

Fiber

Women who ate more fiber in their diet, without changing anything else in their diet, lose just as much weight as women who go on a new diet, reports scientists. It's one of the few dieting strategies that most experts agree on.

Fiber can also improve your digestion and help reduce bloating, so you feel overall healthier and happier with your body as your body changes.

Whole fruits and vegetables are the best sources of natural fiber. While you can take a fiber supplement during menopause, getting fiber from your food means you don't miss out on the antioxidants, vitamins, minerals and other benefits of your food.

Foods to Avoid During Menopause

Besides common weight gain offenders like foods that are rich in fat and carbohydrates, you may also find that certain foods make your menopause symptoms worse.

For example, many women find that they have certain trigger foods that bring on hot flashes during menopause. Some of the most common culprits include:

- Alcohol
- Coffee
- Spicy foods

Try and limit these foods and see if doing so improves your menopause experience.

Other Lifestyle Strategies for Menopause Weight Loss and a Happier Experience

Food is just one aspect in the equation. If you want to maintain a healthy weight, boost your mood and reduce symptoms of menopause, look for small ways to change your lifestyle and your habits to increase your wellness.

Eat a Little Less

When you're in your 50s or older, you likely need 200 to 300 fewer calories than when you were younger. This is due to estrogen levels changing, as well as your body composition and activity levels changing.

It's important to look at your eating habits and bring mindfulness to your diet patterns. Instead of mindlessly eating in the same patterns as when you were younger, focus on foods that truly bring you fulfillment and

pleasure, and avoid snacking on unnecessary foods that no longer satisfy you.

Move a Little More

Exercise doesn't just help you beat back any menopause-related weight gain. It can also help stave off the loss of muscle that comes with aging, and improve your bone health which is essential for women ages 40 and older.

Enjoy 150 minutes of aerobic exercises, such as walking your dog or going for a swim, every week. This can help burn extra calories so that you lose weight.

It's also important to do strength training, such as lifting weight. This helps improve bone strength and density and prevents bone loss related to menopause.

Stay Positive

Stress, and the accompanying rush of cortisol (a stress hormone) can cause your body to pack on fat.

Staying positive and focused can help reduce stress and limit your weight gain during this time of your life. Keep in mind that every woman will experience menopause and you're not alone in your journey.

Some women find it helpful to join a support group or talk to friends and family who have journeyed through menopause.

Healthy stress-reduction strategies like meditation can also help. Research suggests that meditation can even reduce menopause symptoms like hot flashes!

This journey is uniquely yours. Whatever experience you have, take control of what you can — your diet, your supplements and your daily habits — and release what you can't control. This simple step can make a world of difference as your body prepares itself for the next chapter in your life story.