

Healthy eating for the menopause

The change in hormones that happen around the menopause can affect your bone health, heart health, weight and mood. Eating a well-balanced diet has a multitude of health benefits both around the time of the menopause and in the future, even if you're taking HRT.

Why does what you eat and drink matter during and after the menopause?

For your mood. Eating healthy foods can lift your mood, combat fatigue and give your energy levels a boost. Foods high in essential fats such as Omega 3 oils, and those rich in B vitamins and calcium can also help improve your mood.

For your bones. Your bone density (a measure of bone strength and health) usually starts to decrease naturally in your late thirties, and this speeds up in the years around the menopause when your estrogen drops. Your bone breaks down faster than new bone tissue can grow, making them weaker and more susceptible to breaking. Calcium and vitamin D are particularly important for bone strength and many other vitamins and minerals, such as iron and magnesium, are vital too.

For your weight. Maintaining a healthy weight is crucially important for your health in the future, especially for the health of your heart and blood vessels.

For your gut health. Many women suffer from bloating, cramps and other IBS-like symptoms during the perimenopause and menopause. There are friendly bacteria in your gut, and what you eat helps maintain them and keep harmful bacteria at bay. A healthy gut can improve your emotional wellbeing, increase production of the 'happy hormone' serotonin, reduce inflammation and improve your general health and wellbeing.

Which foods and nutrients will help?

A Mediterranean diet. A great place to start for a menopause-friendly diet is to follow the principles of a Mediterranean diet. This is high in vegetables, nuts and seeds, beans, wholegrains, fermented dairy, seafood (or other sources of Omega 3 oils) and unsaturated fats especially extra virgin olive oil, and low in processed foods, meat, other dairy foods, salt and sugar.

Gut-friendly foods. Having healthy gut bacteria can help with your energy levels, immune system and weight. Eating plenty of fibre is good for your friendly bacteria, and the other main foods for gut health are prebiotic and probiotic foods. Prebiotics stimulate the growth of good bacteria, and these include garlic, onions, leeks, asparagus, chicory, ginger, cabbage, beetroot, bananas, blueberries, and apples. Probiotic foods contain live bacteria and yeasts and may help restore the natural balance of gut bacteria. These include kefir, live yoghurt, kombucha, sauerkraut, kimchi and live apple cider vinegar.

Low GI carbs. Try to avoid white refined carbohydrates such as in white bread, white rice and pizza, as these cause a rapid release of blood glucose (sugar) which can make mood swings worse. Changing to low GI (glycaemic index) carbohydrates will help maintain blood sugar levels. These include wholegrain bread, brown rice, pulses, beans and sweet potatoes and other low GI vegetables such as cabbage, salad and greens. Smaller meals more regularly might also help keep mood swings in check.

Vitamin D

Vitamin D helps to slow down bone loss and to absorb calcium to strengthen your muscles, teeth and bones. There are three ways to get vitamin D into your body – through diet, sunlight and supplements.

Foods naturally rich in vitamin D include oily fish, like herring, salmon, sardines and mackerel, egg yolks and raw chanterelle mushrooms. Some foods have vitamin D added to them, such as some breads, yoghurts, orange juice, fat spreads, breakfast cereals, soy and almond milks and yoghurts. This is normally shown on the packaging.

Food alone doesn't usually provide enough vitamin D so exposing your skin to sunlight is more effective during summer. In the UK it can still be difficult to get enough vitamin D from sunlight, especially in winter. The NHS recommends that everyone should consider taking a supplement of 10 micrograms a day. If you don't go outside often, have darker skin, cover your skin or wear sunblock you should consider a supplement all year round.

Iron. You need iron for your bone health and healthy blood cells. As well as red and organ meat, many plant foods are a great source of iron, such as spinach, broccoli, kale, cavalo nero, swiss chard, lentils, chickpeas, red kidney beans, soy beans, cashews, sesame seeds, dried apricots and baked potatoes.

Calcium. Calcium gives your bones their strength and hardness. Choose some calcium-rich foods including dairy products such as milk, yoghurt, kefir and cheese, green leafy vegetables, other vegetables like cabbage and broccoli, nuts, sesame seeds, soft fish bones found in tinned fish, dried fruit, pulses (especially white beans) and tofu. You can also buy fortified foods and drink, like breakfast cereal and alternative plant-based milks.

Forming healthy habits

Start with small changes. Add foods in slowly or in small amounts. For example, snack on a small handful of nuts or seeds, or add a small amount of lentils to a meal. This is more achievable than making big changes and gives your body a chance to get used to them.

Eat a variety of foods. Recent research shows us it is the variety of plant-based foods that really benefit your gut microbiome and have a positive ripple effect on your whole health. While it's important to still have foods from the five main food groups (fruit and vegetables, carbohydrates, beans and pulses, dairy and alternatives, and proteins) it is the plant-based foods where variety is key. These are your vegetables, wholegrains, beans, pulses, nuts and seeds.

Eat well for a healthy weight. It's common to gain weight around the menopause and this tends to be around your middle. This is due to a change in metabolism as well as lifestyle habits. While a healthy weight is important, don't focus on restricting yourself because this can become quite negative. Instead, let food be a pleasure and choose a variety of foods to get the full range of nutrients and improve your gut health.

Cut down on alcohol. Drinking a lot of alcohol can weaken your bones and lead to heart disease. It can affect your mood, sleep, and menopause symptoms too. Try to stay within the recommended 14 units of alcohol per week – that's about a small glass (2/3rds full) of wine per day, one pint of beer or cider, or a single measure of spirit. Plus, have days throughout the week where you don't drink at all.

Looking after your lifestyle

As well as what you eat, what you do matters too.

Stop smoking. Smoking raises the risk of broken bones and heart disease and affects your menopause symptoms. If you give up smoking your risk of breaking a bone begins to return to normal.

Move more. Exercise maintains muscle mass, helps you stay a healthy weight, and improves your heart health, bone health and mood. Go for regular exercise that bears your own weight and impacts through your joints, such as walking, jogging, dancing or tennis.

Get a good night's sleep. Sleep affects all aspects of your health. Take steps to get a good night's sleep such as getting into a sleep routine and keeping your room cool.

