



The role of diet during the menopause

Menopause occurs in women when the female hormones oestrogen starts to drop. This is a natural part of a woman's life cycle. As always, maintaining a healthy diet and lifestyle is the most important advice for women at this time (see the [Food Pyramid and Healthy Eating Guidelines](#) for more information).

Physical activity must also remain a priority for women as this benefits weight management and also bone and heart health. Try to include 20 minutes of moderate exercise, e.g. 30 minutes walking on most days of the week. As with all life's stages some nutrients will require special attention at this time.

Iron requirements drop

As periods cease iron requirements drop so your risk of iron deficiency is reduced. However, it is still important to eat iron rich foods e.g. lean red meat, chicken, oily fish in your diet 3 to 4 times per week. For more information on iron in your diet refer to our fact sheet '[Women and iron. Are we getting enough?](#)'

The middle age spread, fact or fiction?

Some women who have never had weight problems in the past find they may gain weight during this time. An individual's metabolism does decrease slightly as we get older by approximately 2% of our calorie requirements per decade. This equates to 2% of 2000 calories (normal woman's requirements per day) or, about 40 calories, which is equal to a small plain biscuit or a small piece of fruit. So it is not significant! Many people however do adjust to a more sedentary lifestyle as they get older and this uses less energy and causes weight gain.

Adjust your food choices and look at your activity levels to avoid this happening. Remember that being overweight increases your risk of developing heart disease, diabetes and certain cancers. For more information refer to [the BMI chart](#).

Them bones, them bones.....

Bone loss is a normal part of the aging process, however as oestrogen levels drop this occurs more quickly. Boosting your calcium intake can slow this process. It is recommended that we take three servings of calcium rich food per day. One serving equals 1 glass of milk, one yogurt or 1 oz of cheese. Choose low fat varieties of the above if you are watching your weight. These have similar calcium content to full fat varieties. Watch your intake of caffeine and switch to more milk based drinks for e.g. cappuccinos or lattes.



The heart of the matter

Heart disease is not always considered a woman's problem. However it is still the number one cause of death in women. Heart disease tends to affect women at a later age. Oestrogen levels dropping cause a negative effect on blood cholesterol and bring about an increase in same. Raised blood cholesterol is a major risk factor for the development of coronary heart disease. All women of menopausal age should have a fasting lipid profile done by their GP. To reduce your risk of heart disease

- (1) Be a healthy weight
- (2) Reduce your overall fat intake by choosing lean meats, low fat dairy products and cutting down on sweet and processed foods.
- (3) Increase your intake of wholegrain cereals, breads, fruit and vegetables.
- (4) Include fish twice weekly in your diet, particularly oily fish like salmon, mackerel, herring.
- (5) Look at your salt intake
- (6) Get more physically active.

For information on heart health refer to '[Enjoy your Food and look after your Heart](#)'.

The role of soya in menopause

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is often prescribed for women to help reduce some of the unpleasant side effects associated with menopause. HRT is not an option for every woman and as a result alternative options, e.g. soya have been looked at.

Soya products contain a substance called isoflavones. These are plant oestrogens which have a similar chemical structure to oestrogen but are much less potent in their effects. Soya products have been associated with

- (1) a reduction in blood cholesterol
- (2) a reduction in bone loss
- (3) some reduction in physical symptoms, e.g. hot flushes

The recommended intake of soya for maximum effect is 25 grams per day. It is better to distribute this throughout the day, e.g. 3 to 4 portions. This could be achieved by taking soya milk with wholegrain for breakfast, soya yogurt dessert, soya milk drink at bedtime. Remember to choose calcium enriched soya products.

For more information on any diet related questions please contact a qualified dietitian/nutritionist. For more information please see the [Specialist Consultants](#) section on the website.

INDI, Ashgrove House, Kill Avenue, Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin

Email: info@indi.ie

© Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Institute

Feb 2005