

# Flushed with suc

The natural way to delay the menopause and reduce or avoid the distressing symptoms often associated with it.

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**H**ot flushes, loss of libido and mood swings are seen as an almost inevitable accompaniment to the menopause in the West. So why do most women in Japan and the Far East rarely experience them? (1, 2). The answer may well lie in what they eat - a diet mainly based on plant foods, which includes substances called phytoestrogens, and little in the way of dairy products.

Any woman who has periods will go through the menopause, marked by her last period, although the transition can last a few months or even years. The usual age is between 40 and 60 but it can come earlier in life and each woman is likely to have different experiences, with some sailing through while others suffer severe physical and psychological side effects (3, 4).

The menopause occurs when ovaries stop responding to hormones from the brain which control the monthly cycle. They include oestrogen and progesterone. Oestrogen is responsible for female's sexual characteristics and progesterone controls fertilisation and pregnancy (3, 4). With menopause, oestrogen and progesterone levels both decrease while other hormone levels increase in an attempt to induce ovulation.

The outcome of this conflict can be fatigue, headaches, sleep disturbances, dry skin and hair, joint pains, emotional mood swings, hot flushes, night sweats and an increase in body hair. The risk of heart disease can increase and there can be weight gain, raised blood pressure, weakness in pelvic floor muscles, an increase in cholesterol levels and a higher risk of osteoporosis (3, 4).

## All wind and...

The usual treatment for this litany of ailments is hormone replacement therapy (HRT). Much of it comes from mares' urine, which is rich in oestrogen. It's an extremely cruel process, with pregnant mares housed in stables so tiny they may not be able even to lie down, harnessed to a device which collects their urine for up to six months (3).

HRT works by supplementing the body's reducing hormone levels and is claimed to provide relief from most of the symptoms of menopause. Apart from the cruelty, there are negatives, including a higher risk of breast and womb cancer, blood clots, strokes and heart disease. Using HRT for five years or more increases the risk of gallstones and liver damage (3, 6, 7, 8, 9) and may also be linked to asthma and other respiratory allergies. In a recent study with 2,500 women, up to 50 per cent of those on HRT developed asthma (10). Fifty-one women (aged 50 and over) in every 1000 may develop breast cancer after 10 years on HRT - six more than those not on HRT (3).

Although it's claimed that HRT prevents osteoporosis, one study shows the benefits only occur when it's taken for seven years or more. When it's stopped, bone density declines dramatically (11).

Good nutrition is essential throughout life but particularly vital during the menopause as it helps to keep hormone levels balanced and reduces the chances of symptoms. But there is growing evidence that a plant-based diet can actually alleviate symptoms entirely or shorten their duration.

Menopausal stress can be improved dramatically by balancing blood sugar levels, allowing the body to circulate those hormones it has more efficiently. The trick is to avoid refined, sweet foods such as biscuits, chocolate and sweets as these quickly release their sugars into the blood. Starchy carbohydrates such as wholegrains, beans, pulses and vegetables release sugars more slowly and help maintain a balance.

It's important to eat little and often as blood sugar levels can drop if there are long waits between meals. Fibre is another important element in controlling blood sugar levels but is best obtained from eating plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables, wholegrains, nuts and seeds rather than bran (3, 12).

There is a protein in dairy products called casein which isn't easily absorbed by the body. As a result, it can remain in the gut, undigested, where it may rot and produce toxins and mucus which can stop the absorption of nutrients - one thing you don't want to happen during the menopause. An alarming amount of energy is needed to sort out digestive problems and the result can be tiredness and fatigue. Tryptophan and sodium are other dairy ingredients that can produce fatigue and bloating and avoiding dairy altogether can decrease cramps (3, 13).

Meat, and especially red meat, should be avoided completely. Red meat dramatically reduces the amount of oestrogen produced and can increase the risk of osteoporosis by causing calcium loss. Saturated fats in meat also reduces the absorption of essential fatty acids which are important in reducing symptoms of the menopause.

Coffee, alcohol, tea and fizzy pop are also best avoided. Coffee and tea are diuretics and flush nutrients out of the body while the tannin in tea inhibits their absorption. Alcohol contributes to low sugar levels and liver damage, slows the beneficial effects of nutrients and interferes with the metabolism of essential fats (3, 16).



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Fat comes in three forms - saturated, polyunsaturated and monounsaturated. Polyunsaturated fats are the fatty acids, omega 3 and omega 6, which are essential for good health and good sources include flaxseeds, rapeseeds and their oils, soya beans and their oil and nuts, particularly walnuts. Avoid hydrogenated fats and oils entirely as they increase the risk of heart disease (3, 17).

Sodium maintains blood pressure and controls water retention while the actual water balance in the body and heart rhythm are controlled by potassium and sodium working together. If a lot of sodium is eaten then more potassium is required to balance it out. Too much sodium and blood pressure goes up. Potassium is lost through drinking coffee or fizzy drinks, which are diuretics, or low blood sugar levels and laxatives. For healthy levels of both, also avoid processed foods and adding salt to meals (3).

Red and yellow foods, such as peppers, tomatoes, dried fruits and carrots, are rich in vitamin A (betacarotene) and can reduce heavy bleeding during the menopause (18). Vitamin B complex, found in wholegrains, green leafy vegetables, yeast extracts and fortified products such as soya-based mock meats, can improve energy levels and reduce fatigue, irritability, breast tenderness, heavy bleeding and dry skin and improve libido.

Without a good intake of B vitamins, the liver can't get rid of old oestrogen and the oestrogen/ progesterone balance is upset. Vegetarian women have been shown to excrete three times more oestrogen than meat eaters, producing a better balance and reducing breast tenderness (3). Vitamin C has been shown to reduce heavy bleeding and hot flushes and vitamin E also has some powerful beneficial effects. It's found in nuts, seeds, peppers, tomatoes and avocados.

Selenium is found in many fresh fruits and vegetables and can also decrease hot flushes, while magnesium-rich foods, such as soya beans, wholegrain, broccoli and nuts can reduce anxiety and increase libido (3, 5).

And so to Japan, where controlling menopausal symptoms with diet seems to happen naturally. Green and yellow vegetables and betacarotene, in addition to phytoestrogens, seem to play a part in this (15).

A rice extract known as gamma-oryzanol can reduce symptoms - a 20mg supplement taken daily was shown to reduce hot flushes and other symptoms. Co-enzyme Q10, has also been shown to reduce fatigue and supplements of both are available. Herbs can also help and include black cohosh, agnus castus, blue cohosh, yarrow, dandelion and motherwort.

Plant hormones called phytoestrogens (isoflavones) also play an important role in reducing symptoms



and delaying the onset of menopause (1, 3, 21). The bonus is that they also seem to help prevent cancer and osteoporosis, both of which increase in risk after the menopause. Phytoestrogens are found in soya products, celery, fennel, liquorice, rhubarb and ginseng and in a supplement called Phytoest (22). The soya-based supplement, Phytosoya, has also been shown to considerably reduce the severity of hot flushes (23).

Research published in the British Medical Journal found that eating phytoestrogens in the form of soya, linseed oil and red clover sprouts reduced symptoms and seemed to put the clock back naturally (3, 24). The research now seems pretty clear, eating soya products can reduce hot flushes (25, 26, 15, 27, 28).

There is an increased risk of osteoporosis after the menopause because of the fall in oestrogen, which helps to keep bones strong. Women who ate large amounts of isoflavones were found to have fewer joint and back pains compared to those who ate little (29).

Current research seems fairly clear - natural menopause is better than hormone therapy. Eating a variety of nuts, seeds, fresh fruit and vegetables, wholegrains and pulses reduces symptoms and delays onset. The most important nutrients are vitamins A (betacarotene), B complex, C, and E, minerals - magnesium, selenium, calcium and zinc, essential fats from nuts, seeds, plant oils and soya products, naturally high in isoflavones. Meat and dairy, on the other hand, almost certainly increase the symptoms and bring additional risks with them.

References available on [www.vegetarian.org.uk](http://www.vegetarian.org.uk) or send an SAE to the VVF, marked Menopause References.

Judi Hewitt, age 57, has been vegetarian since 9 and vegan since 44: "I had two years of hell on HRT, so one day decided 'no more'. Instead I ate foods such as tofu and soya milk and have never felt bad since. I never really thought my diet helped until I saw my meat-eating friends deteriorating with the menopause and saw it must do. I never used to bang the vegan drum but I certainly do now! I go hill-walking regularly and certainly don't feel my age - and people tell me I don't look it."