

Diet and menopause: What to eat to manage your symptoms

Medically reviewed by Maven Providers:
Nutrition Coach, Kendra Tolbert, and OB-GYN,
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Managing your menopause symptoms can feel like a science experiment at times. Should you try hormone replacement therapy, supplements, acupuncture meditation, or that random remedy that your neighbor swore worked for them?

Luckily, it turns out that one of the simplest ways to help keep your symptoms in-check might be through your daily diet. "What we eat affects our health and wellbeing during every part of our life cycle," says Maven Nutrition Coach Kendra Tolbert. "Perimenopause (the time before menopause) and menopause are no different."

Here's a look at why nutrition matters during menopause, plus some ideas for foods to eat and what to avoid.

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Why eating well during the menopause years is so important

It's important to eat an overall healthy diet throughout the menopause years. Most days, try to stick to healthy options like fruits, veggies, lean protein, and whole grains. (Of course, sometimes you're going to want to order pizza. That's understandable! Just remember, balance is key.)

Why should you try to eat nutritiously at this time?

"Perimenopause and menopause are associated with an increased risk of a number of conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, thyroid conditions, and osteoporosis," Tolbert says. "Fortunately, certain nutrition choices can reduce those risks. Plus, many of those same nutrition choices can lessen the severity or completely relieve some of the symptoms people experience during perimenopause and menopause."

Insulin resistance, when your body can't maintain healthy blood sugar levels, can also be a concern during menopause. "During this time, you become more insulin resistant," Tolbert says. "That means your cells don't respond as efficiently as they once did to insulin. And that insulin resistance is associated with an increased risk of developing diabetes, heart disease, and some forms of cancer."

Weight gain, while not the most important measure of health, is also another reality for many during the menopause years.

"Changes in weight and body composition are normal and to be expected," Tolbert says. "Focusing on eating a wide variety of foods, getting adequate rest, managing stress, and maintaining muscle mass through weight-bearing exercise can help you maintain your body's unique, happy, and healthy weight."

So can what I eat actually affect my menopause symptoms?

Research looks promising that nutrition choices can lessen or even completely relieve certain menopause symptoms like hot flashes, insomnia, and more.

A large 2013 [study](#) looked at how diet affected over 60,000 menopausal women. Those who followed a Mediterranean-style diet or ate fruits and vegetables multiple times a day noticed a significant reduction in symptoms like hot flashes and night sweats. Those who ate a high-fat or high-sugar diet, on the other hand, saw an increase in symptoms.

One smaller study published in the journal [Menopause](#) looked at the diets of 38 postmenopausal women. Those that followed a low-fat, vegan diet for 12 weeks that included ½ cup of soybeans every day reported no hot flashes (or significantly fewer flashes) compared to those who didn't change their diet.

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While going completely vegan isn't necessary, this was still an interesting study when it comes to learning about the impact diet can have on menopause symptoms. (More on that below.)

Best foods to manage menopause symptoms

Menopause is hard enough to manage—so when it comes to what to eat, don't feel like you need to try anything new, trendy, or need to stick to an impossible-to-follow diet.

“For the most part, the same simple health-supporting nutrition principles that have been important your entire life, remain essential during the menopausal transition,” Tolbert says. “You'll still want to focus on incorporating fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, seeds, protein-rich foods (plant and/ or animal sources), herbs, and spices into your meals and snacks daily.”

Some other foods you might want to try to help manage your symptoms include:

- Calcium-rich foods like low-fat cheese, yogurt, and soy milk
- Green, leafy vegetables
- Soybeans
- Tofu
- Nuts
- Legumes
- Olive oil (try using instead of butter or margarine when cooking)

Try the plate method

Tolbert also recommends following the plate method to structure your meals. “Insulin resistance is more common during this time, so I highly recommend including protein, fat, and fiber at each meal,” she says. This can help keep blood sugar levels stable.

She recommends practicing the plate method at every meal: Include ½ plate of non-starchy vegetables like broccoli or spinach, ¼ plate of carb-rich foods like sweet potatoes or brown rice, ¼ plate of protein-rich foods like grilled chicken or tofu. Plus with whatever fats you used to cook or flavor your food with, herbs, and spices.

Foods/drinks to avoid and what to have instead

It might take some trial and error to find out which foods and drinks make you feel better or worse. (Keeping a food journal for a bit can help you keep track.) “I recommend avoiding anything that triggers your symptoms,” Tolbert says. “Some people find caffeine, alcohol, and spicy foods trigger hot flashes. Others don't.”

Caffeine

Caffeine can affect your sleep. It also triggers hot flashes for some. If caffeine is triggering for you, avoid coffee and soda. Try herbal or low-caffeine tea instead. Some options include:

- Chamomile tea
- Mint tea
- Ginger tea

Spicy foods

If spicy foods like those made with peppers or chilis trigger your hot flashes, skip them. But your food doesn't have to be totally bland. Instead, try other herbs and spices to make meals more flavorful like:

- Cilantro
- Parsley
- Lemongrass
- Cinnamon
- Mint

Alcohol

Also, note how foods you eat or drink can affect your already precious sleep. “Because sleep disturbances can be a problem during this time, I suggest avoiding alcohol before bed and limiting it, in general, to no more than one drink a day. Excess alcohol intake is associated with an increased risk of [developing breast cancer and other health conditions](#),” Tolbert suggests.

The bottom line

Remember, everyone is affected differently by menopause. Some have severe symptoms that last for years. Others may get off easy with little-to-no symptoms (feel very lucky if that’s you!). The same goes for diet and menopause. Changing your diet might make a big difference in keeping your symptoms in-check. Or you might not notice much of a difference. It might take a bit of trial and error to figure out which foods and drinks to stick to and which to avoid because they trigger symptoms.

If you have more questions about your diet and menopause, reach out to a [Maven Nutrition Coach](#) anytime.

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Hot flashes 101

Maven OB-GYN Rana Daniel explains why hot flashes happen in the first place and some options for how to best manage them.

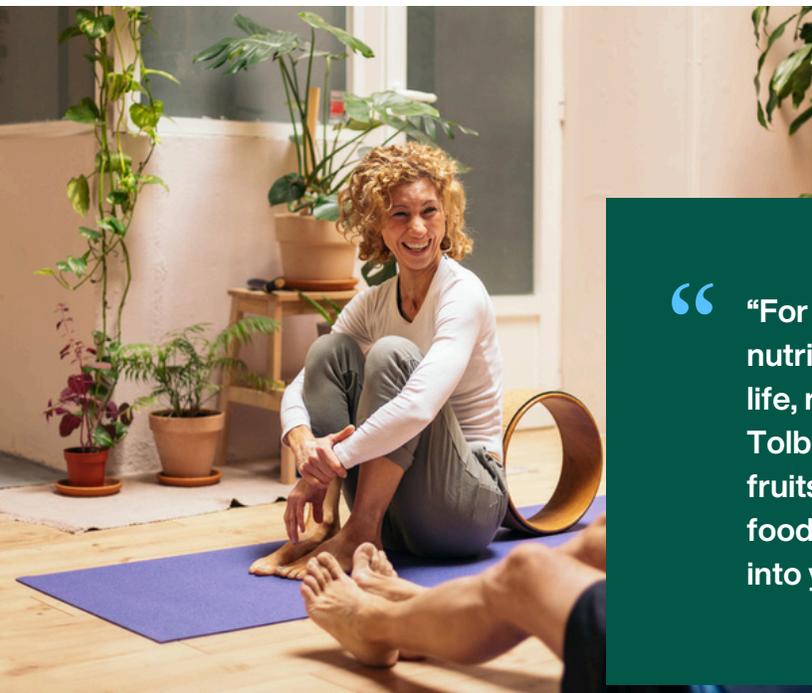
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Rana Daniel
OB-GYN



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