



COOL IT: HOW TO EASE YOUR MENOPAUSE

WORDS LOUISE ATKINSON RECIPES ANNIE BELL RECIPE PHOTOGRAPHS ANT DUNCAN

Like many women, I spent much of my forties cursing mood swings, foggy head and occasional bouts of bristling anxiety before I had to reluctantly accept that my hormones might be mucking me around. Officially, you don't reach menopause until a year after your final period (average age 51) – but hormones begin their erratic freefall several years before. If you're very lucky, you might sail through without a single hot flush, but most of us will notice odd, seemingly unconnected, symptoms such as dry skin, thinning hair, weight gain, memory loss, aching joints or even gum disease.

GP Dr Philippa Kaye, the author of *The M Word* (Summersdale, £9.99), advises that a diet which turns up the volume on fruit and vegetables and dials down junk food will 'give your body its best shot' at minimising menopausal symptoms. 'I advise my patients to avoid caffeine, spicy foods and alcohol too if possible,' she adds, 'because they can cause a surge in the stress-hormone cortisol, which can trigger hot flushes. Changing our diet is one of the ways we can help ourselves – unfortunately, there are still taboos surrounding the menopause and women are often reluctant to ask their GP for help.'

For the next generation of 40- and 50-somethings, things could look very different. With 12% of the world's population predicted to be menopausal by the year 2025, 'menotech' is expected to become big business, with age-specific healthcare apps and data used to better understand the impact the menopause has on physical and mental health. In the meantime, however, research is beginning to suggest that certain foods could have particularly potent menopause-busting effects.

HOT FLUSHES

A healthier diet with generous helpings of fruit and veg could help banish hot flushes and night sweats entirely, according to a US study. Research is also continuing into the role of foods containing 'phytoestrogens' – natural, plant-based forms of the hormone oestrogen found in foods like tofu, miso, soy and lentils as well as wholegrains, garlic, celery, apples, plums, cherries, broccoli, carrots, rhubarb and seeds. In many parts of Asia, where the average woman's daily intake of isoflavones (a type of phytoestrogen) is 20-80mg a day, hot flushes are reported by only 14 per cent of menopausal women. But in the West, where our isoflavone intake is 1-3mg per day, flushes affect 80-85 per cent of women. Nutritionist May Simpkin recommends adding soy milk, soy yogurt and tofu to the diet and looking out for frozen edamame (soya) beans which can be enjoyed in place of peas or broad beans. Some studies have found linseeds can reduce the frequency of hot flushes; May recommends grinding your own in small batches and sprinkling over salads or cereal. And think about choosing low fat dairy products – in a major study from 2013, Harvard researchers found that milk contains enzymes that boost the amount of oestrogen in a women's system.

BRAIN FOG

If you're wondering why you're noticing stiff, achy joints, blame those dropping oestrogen levels! The hormone normally helps maintain joint and bone health, but as levels decline, inflammation around the joints can cause problems. 'Processed foods and sugar in the diet can exacerbate that inflammatory effect,' says May, 'but a diet rich in vegetables will help to reduce inflammation in the body.' A plate full of vegetables also guarantees plenty of fibre in the diet, which can help keep hormones in balance. A recent study of breast cancer survivors found that high fibre intake was linked with a reduction in hot flushes over a 12-month period. The omega-3 fatty acids in both oily fish (such as salmon and mackerel) and nuts and seeds also help lubricate aching joints. Omega-3 is great for brain health too, which becomes very important at menopause. Normally, oestrogen acts to

Research is beginning to suggest that certain foods could have a particularly potent menopause-busting effect

regulate levels of the stress hormone cortisol, but when there's less oestrogen running around your body, cortisol can become dominant, disturbing the balance of brain chemicals and causing memory problems. One tell-tale sign of menopause that so many people miss is a feeling that you've lost your 'mojo', or irrational surges of anger as the cortisol takes hold. For me the most debilitating symptom wasn't hot flushes, but that I was struggling to concentrate, and my – normally brilliant – multi-tasking skills disappeared. May says the omega-3 fats in oily fish, nuts and seeds could help, and (bonus) they might also help to counteract the menopausal symptoms of dry hair, dry skin and cracked nails at the same time.

FLAGGING ENERGY

It's good advice to avoid skipping meals as this causes dips in your blood sugar, which can play havoc with already erratic hormones; plus the surge in adrenaline you get if you let yourself become hungry can be enough to trigger a hot flush. Shelve any processed carbohydrates which might satisfy a craving but which can cause an energy slump afterwards, and instead aim to include protein with every meal to keep blood sugar levels steady. A healthy diet and regular exercise could be all you need to ease you gently through your menopausal years; it has certainly worked for May (who is 54) and several of her clients. Like me, however, you might feel you need a little extra support from HRT to keep you fully functioning. Although the hormone boost of HRT will minimise menopause symptoms, and studies show it can help protect against heart disease and osteoporosis, there is much to be said for the extra protective benefits of a healthy diet to support your body through the menopause. ➤

FOODS TO AVOID

SUGAR: Fast-acting carbohydrates cause insulin levels to become erratic, which in turn affects the levels of other hormones and can exacerbate menopausal symptoms. Switch from white carbs to brown, cut back on sugar in any form and avoid large quantities of fruit juice.

ALCOHOL: A glass of wine might trigger a temporary rise in oestrogen levels, but the sudden drop once the alcohol is metabolised is a common trigger for hot flushes. In midlife, the body's water content is reduced so any alcohol consumed is more concentrated in the blood and therefore more potent.

CAFFEINE: Studies show any more than three to four caffeinated drinks a day can make flushes worse. Your sensitivity to caffeine can increase at midlife too, which makes that extra cup of coffee more likely to exacerbate mood swings.

YOUR MENOPAUSE MENU

Miso soup with tofu

SERVES 1 (OR MAKES 2 SMALL CUPFULS) **V Vn GF DF** HANDS-ON TIME 10 MINS TOTAL TIME 10 MINS

- ◆ 300ml light vegetable* stock or water
- ◆ 50g extra-fine green beans, halved
- ◆ 40g shiitake or chestnut mushrooms, sliced thinly
- ◆ 1 tbsp brown miso paste (we used Yutaka)
- ◆ 100g tofu (ideally silken), diced
- ◆ 1 spring onion, sliced on the diagonal
- ◆ chopped coriander

- 1 Bring the stock (or water) to the boil in a small saucepan, add the beans and mushrooms and cook for about 3 minutes or until just tender.
- 2 Put the miso in a small bowl and blend in a little of the stock from the pan, so that you have a smooth thin paste. If necessary, give it a quick whisk, then stir this all back into the soup base.
- 3 Add the diced tofu to a serving bowl and ladle in the soup. Serve scattered with spring onions and coriander.

*Use vegan stock if required.

■ 162cals; 8g fat (1g sat fat); 15g protein; 4g fibre; 6g carbs; 4g total sugars; 0.9g salt ➤

» GET AHEAD

If you want to have the miso soup as a portable lunch, omit the green beans and use a handful of spinach instead. Place all the veg, the miso and tofu in a container and store in the fridge. When ready to eat, add a mugful of boiling water, stir gently and leave to stand for a few minutes before eating.

SERVING SUGGESTION

Serve these easy salmon teriyaki rice crackers alongside the miso soup
Lay a few slivers of radish over a rice cake. Add some flaked cooked salmon and drizzle with a little teriyaki sauce. Dot with a few cooked edamame beans and top with a small pile of Super Sprout seeds.

» NUTRITION NOTES

This light soup has multiple benefits; tofu and miso are rich in isoflavones, which evidence suggests may help reduce hot flushes. If serving the salmon crackers alongside, the omega-3 contributes to brain function, and also does wonders for dry skin and nails.

Seeded loaf

A brilliant power-packed nut and seed loaf that is especially good for the yeast-shy; similar to cornbread in texture and flavour.

MAKES ABOUT 16 SLICES **V GF DF** ❄️

HANDS-ON TIME 25 MINS

TOTAL TIME 1 HR, PLUS COOLING

- ◆ 40g pumpkin seeds
- ◆ 200g ground almonds
- ◆ 25g linseeds, coarsely ground or milled flaxseed
- ◆ 15g poppy seeds, plus 1 tsp extra to sprinkle
- ◆ 50g pine nuts
- ◆ 1½ tsp baking powder*
- ◆ a rounded ¼ tsp bicarbonate of soda
- ◆ ¼ tsp cayenne pepper, optional
- ◆ 7 large eggs, separated
- ◆ 40g coconut oil, melted (or rapeseed oil), plus extra to grease
- ◆ 1 tbsp clear honey, optional
- ◆ 1½ tbsp cider vinegar

- 1 Preheat the oven to 190°C, 170°C fan, gas 5. Grease and fully line a 900g loaf tin (about 10cm x 20cm on the base) with baking paper.
- 2 Grind the pumpkin seeds in a mini processor until they have an almost flour-like consistency then add them to a large mixing bowl with the ground almonds, linseeds, the 15g of poppy seeds and two-thirds of the pine nuts. Sift in the baking powder, bicarb, cayenne and a large pinch of sea salt and stir to mix well. In a large jug or a bowl, briefly whisk the egg yolks, oil, honey (if using) and vinegar to combine.
- 3 Using an electric mixer, whisk the egg whites to soft peaks in another large bowl. Pour the wet ingredients over the dry ones and beat to roughly combine, then add half the whipped egg whites, beating again to roughly mix. Add the remaining egg whites and beat well until the mixture is smooth and creamy.
- 4 Transfer the mixture to the tin and smooth the top. Sprinkle with the remaining poppyseeds and pine nuts, gently pressing them into the mixture. Bake for about 35 minutes until the loaf is golden, shrinking from the sides, and a skewer comes out clean. Turn out and cool completely before slicing.

*Use gluten-free baking powder, if required.

■ 190cals; 16g fat (3g sat fat); 9g protein; 1g fibre; 1g carbs; 2g total sugars; 0.3g salt ➤

» GET AHEAD

The loaf keeps in an airtight container for up to 2 days, or can be sliced and frozen.



» NUTRITION NOTES

This flourless loaf is rich in omega-3 fatty acids, fibre and phytoestrogens from the almonds and all the different seeds. When the seeds are ground, it's easier for the body to digest them and absorb the nutrients.

Mackerel with chicory, apple and walnuts

SERVES 2 **GF DF** HANDS-ON TIME 20 MINS TOTAL TIME 20 MINS

For a lower-calorie meal, serve just one mackerel fillet per person.

- ◆ 40g walnuts, roughly chopped
- ◆ 3 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- ◆ 1 tsp Dijon mustard
- ◆ 1 tsp wholegrain mustard
- ◆ 2 tsp cider vinegar
- ◆ 4 mackerel fillets
- ◆ 2 heads of chicory, trimmed and separated into leaves
- ◆ a handful of rocket leaves or watercress
- ◆ 1 red-skinned apple, cored and sliced
- ◆ 2 tbsp snipped chives

- 1 Gently fry the walnuts in 1 tablespoon of oil in a large nonstick frying pan, for about 2 minutes or until golden. Remove to a plate using a draining spoon, and set the pan aside for later.
- 2 Whisk the mustards and vinegar in a small bowl then gradually whisk in 2 tablespoons of olive oil until emulsified. Season to taste.
- 3 Put the frying pan back on a medium-to-high heat. Cut a few slashes through the skin of the mackerel fillets then season on both sides. Add to the hot pan,

skin-side down. Sear for 2-3 minutes or until the skin is slightly crisp. Flip over and cook for another 2 minutes or until just cooked through.

- 4 Meanwhile, toss the chicory leaves, rocket or watercress, apple and chives together with half the dressing. Divide between 2 bowls and top with the mackerel. Drizzle with the rest of the dressing and scatter with the walnuts.
- 714cals; 59g fat (10g sat fat); 33g protein; 4g fibre; 12g carbs; 9g total sugars; 0.9g salt ■

» **NUTRITION NOTES**

Lots of omega-3 here from both the mackerel and walnuts, plus phytoestrogens in the apples and fibre from the fruit and the raw chicory, to help maintain hormonal balance.



FOOD STYLING: KATY GREENWOOD. PROP STYLING: TONY HUTCHINSON. OPENING PHOTOGRAPH: ALAMY