

Nutrition Considerations for Perimenopause and Menopause

What is perimenopause and menopause?

Menopause is the time of life, typically between the ages of 40-58, when people stop having menstrual periods permanently. Someone has reached menopause once it's been 12 months after their last menstrual period. Menopause is not a disease or a disorder - it is a normal part of aging. The time leading up to menopause is called **perimenopause**. This is a time when your body will experience changing hormone (chemical) levels, and it can last 4-8 years.

What is the role of estrogen during perimenopause and menopause?

- **Estrogen** is a hormone made by the ovaries. It plays an important role in growth, development, bone building, and muscle building. Estrogen also provides a protective benefit for many tissues and cell functions throughout the body.
- During perimenopause, the amount of estrogen your body makes declines significantly. This is the reason for many of the common symptoms such as vasomotor symptoms (hot flashes), irregular periods, and difficulty sleeping that you may have during this time.
- The loss of estrogen during menopause may cause physiological (body) changes and an increased risk of developing health problems such as higher blood sugar, blood pressure, and cholesterol levels.

How does perimenopause and menopause affect weight gain?

- Whether or not they have reached menopause, many middle-aged women and people with ovaries experience weight gain (about 1.5 pounds, or 0.7 kilograms, per year). Some causes of age-related weight gain include loss

of lean body mass (muscle) and the body having a harder time building new muscle.

- Lifestyle changes in middle age - including increased life stressors (work changes, aging parents, etc.), changes in physical activity, decreased sleep, and other health conditions - may also lead to weight change.
- Because of hormonal changes from menopause and how decreasing estrogen may change how your body uses energy, you may see an increase in total body fat, particularly abdominal (belly) fat.

What are general recommendations for good health during perimenopause and menopause?

- Prevent **weight cycling** (repetitively losing and gaining weight) by making small, gradual changes that you can stick with.
- Eat regular, nourishing, and enjoyable meals and snacks from a variety of food groups. There are many suggestions for this included later in this handout.
- Include protein as part of each meal to help maintain your muscle mass.
- Eat fiber from vegetables, fruits, beans and legumes, and whole grains.
- Eat a variety of calcium-rich foods. Try to eat or drink 1200 milligrams (mg) of calcium per day. See Table 2 below for amounts of calcium found in common foods.
- Make exercise or movement that you enjoy a part of your day. Try to do weight-bearing activities (walking, hiking, dancing) or resistance activities (wall push-ups, lunges, resistance band workouts, etc.) at least 2 times per week for muscle health.
- Limit or avoid alcohol and cigarette use. If you smoke cigarettes, talk with your doctor about quitting. If you drink alcohol, limit yourself to no more than 1 drink per day.

- Manage stress by talking with a friend, working with a mental health therapist, practicing meditation, using breath exercises, keeping a journal, or pursuing your spiritual journey.
- Try to get good sleep and limit how much you're eating and drinking things that can affect your sleep, such as caffeine and alcohol.
- Eat within 2 hours of waking up and avoid eating late at night or within 2-3 hours of your bedtime.
- Stay hydrated with water and other caffeine-free, unsweetened drinks.
- Celebrate victories such as having fun at a fitness class or workout, feeling stronger, feeling less joint pain, having more energy, or feeling rested instead of focusing on how much your body weighs.
- Be careful if you are taking supplements such as black cohosh, rhubarb, royal jelly, sage, or St. John's wort. These can have bad side effects or cause issues when taken with other medications.
- **To meet with a dietitian who can help you learn about nutrition during menopause, please ask your doctor for a referral.**

What can I do to support muscle and bone health?

It is important to take care of your muscles and bones during perimenopause and menopause.

- The loss of estrogen can impact the health of your muscles and bones. It may increase your risk for **osteoporosis** (weakened bones from a loss of bone density) and **sarcopenia** (the loss of muscle mass, strength, and function over time).
- Weight cycling may also cause muscle loss.
- Lean muscle mass helps burn more calories. Maintaining muscle mass through physical activity and getting enough protein can help prevent increased fat and weight gain.

Use the following table to see some recommendations to help with your muscle and bone health. Check the box next to the ones you'd like to try!

Table 1: Muscle and Bone Health Recommendations

| Recommendation: | Things to try: |
|---|---|
| Eat regular, nourishing, and enjoyable meals and snacks from a variety of food groups. | <input type="checkbox"/> Focus on eating at least 3 times per day. <input type="checkbox"/> Eat foods from many food groups for each meal. <input type="checkbox"/> Check in with hunger and fullness cues (signals from your body that you are hungry or full) before, during, and after eating. <input type="checkbox"/> Eat a balanced snack, such as yogurt with berries or figs and almonds, between meals if you feel hungry. |
| Eat and drink enough protein to help maintain your muscle tissue. | <input type="checkbox"/> Include a lean protein source (like chicken, turkey, or fish) with each meal. <input type="checkbox"/> Incorporate plant-based protein foods (like nuts, seeds, beans, lentils, or tofu) into your diet. <input type="checkbox"/> Try a protein-rich snack like low-fat Greek yogurt, cheese, or a hard-boiled egg. <input type="checkbox"/> Use a protein shake, powder, or bar that is low in added sugar if you find it difficult to get protein from other foods. <input type="checkbox"/> Add beans, peas, or lentils to salads or soups. <input type="checkbox"/> Top your oatmeal, yogurt, or cereal with unsalted nuts and seeds. |
| Exercise or do movement you enjoy as part of your day. Try to do weight-bearing or resistance activities at least 2 times a week. | <input type="checkbox"/> Start exercising at home or outside by taking a walk, using home exercise equipment, or following along with a yoga video. <input type="checkbox"/> Join a gym or fitness center, or start using a gym membership you already have. <input type="checkbox"/> Take a fitness class in-person or online. <input type="checkbox"/> Move around during everyday tasks. For example, do body weight exercises such as squats or lunges while watching television, stretch or do sitting exercises while at your desk, or walk around while talking on the phone. |

| Recommendation: | Things to try: |
|--|--|
| Eat a variety of calcium-rich foods, with a goal of 1200 mg calcium per day. | <input type="checkbox"/> Eat or drink at least 2 servings of milk, cheese, or yogurt daily. Consider lactose-free options as needed. <input type="checkbox"/> Eat calcium-rich foods like beans, salmon, almonds, figs, or fortified cereals and breads. <input type="checkbox"/> Ask your provider whether you need a calcium supplement, and how much you should take. |
| Eat foods with vitamin D, with a goal of eating 800 IU of vitamin D3 daily. | <input type="checkbox"/> Eat and drink things like salmon, sardines, tuna, egg yolks, mushrooms, milk, juice, and grains. <input type="checkbox"/> Ask your provider whether you need a vitamin D supplement, and how much you should take. |

What are calcium-rich foods?

Calcium is an important nutrient for bone health.

- Dairy foods like milk, yogurt and cheese are some of the foods highest in calcium. Non-dairy milk options are often calcium-fortified (produced with added calcium).
- Fish with edible bones, such as canned salmon with soft, mashable bones, are another good source of calcium.

During menopause, your body needs 1200 mg of calcium per day. Use the following table to help determine whether you're getting enough calcium from foods.

Table 2: Calcium Content of Foods

| Calcium amount: | Foods: |
|------------------------|---|
| 300 mg calcium or more | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 cup milk (fat-free or low-fat) • 1 cup non-fat, low-fat, or Greek yogurt • 1 cup calcium-fortified soy milk, rice milk, or oat milk • 5 oz calcium-fortified plant-based yogurt • 1 cup calcium-fortified orange juice • 4 oz ricotta cheese |

| Calcium amount: | Foods: |
|---------------------------------|---|
| 300 mg calcium or more cont. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1.5 oz low-fat cheese (cheddar, mozzarella, or swiss) • 2 oz processed cheese (American) • 3 oz canned sardines (with bones) |
| 200-300 mg calcium | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 oz canned salmon (with bones) • 4 oz tofu • 2 calcium-fortified frozen waffles • 1 oz feta cheese • ½ cup raw soybeans • 2 tablespoons (tbsp) chia seeds |
| 100-200 mg calcium | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ½ cup cooked greens (spinach, turnip, kale, collard, bok choy) • 1 cup cottage cheese • 1 slice calcium-fortified bread • 1/3 cup almonds • ½ cup pudding made with skim milk • 1 cup white beans • 1 packet calcium-fortified oatmeal • 1 cup calcium-fortified cereal |
| 100 mg calcium or less | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 tbsp parmesan cheese • 1 calcium-fortified English muffin • 1 corn muffin • 1 pita bread pocket • 1 6-inch corn tortilla • 1 cup brown rice • 1 whole wheat dinner roll • ½ cup broccoli • ½ cup okra • 1 cup green beans or lima beans • 1 medium orange • 2 dried figs |

What can I do to support cardiovascular (heart) health and prevent heart disease?

It is important to take care of your heart health during perimenopause and menopause.

- The loss of estrogen can impact the **cardiovascular system** (the heart and blood vessels), causing increased arterial stiffness and blood pressure and increasing your risk of heart disease.
- Weight gain with increased fat and decreased muscle can increase your risk of heart disease.
- Limit and reduce alcohol and cigarette use to help reduce your risk of heart disease.

Use the table below to see some recommendations to help with your heart health. Check the box next to the ones you'd like to try!

Table 3: Heart Health Recommendations

| Recommendation: | Things to try: |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Reduce saturated fat in your diet. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Replace butter with olive oil, canola oil, safflower oil, or avocado oil.<input type="checkbox"/> Eat more plant-based proteins, fish and seafood, chicken, and turkey while eating less red meat.<input type="checkbox"/> Choose lean cuts of meat, such as “loin” or skinless chicken breast, and remove visible fat when eating beef, pork, or poultry.<input type="checkbox"/> Limit egg yolks to 1 per day or less.<input type="checkbox"/> Bake, broil, or grill foods rather than frying.<input type="checkbox"/> Use fat-free or low-fat dairy products like milk and yogurt.<input type="checkbox"/> Serve sauces and dressings on the side.<input type="checkbox"/> Check the Nutrition Facts label for the saturated fat content of cooking ingredients like coconut milk, sour cream, or butter. |

| Recommendation: | Things to try: |
|---|---|
| Get fiber from fruits, vegetables, beans and legumes, and whole grains, with a goal of 25 grams (g) per day. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Double the portion of vegetables in casseroles, stir-fries, or soups. <input type="checkbox"/> Add beans to salads, soups, or familiar meals like tacos. <input type="checkbox"/> Top yogurt, oatmeal, or cereal with fresh or frozen fruit, or add ½ cup of whole grain cereal for added crunch. <input type="checkbox"/> Try a whole grain like barley, quinoa, or millet. <input type="checkbox"/> Look for breads, crackers, and tortillas that are 100% whole grain. <input type="checkbox"/> Snack on roasted edamame or popcorn in place of pretzels or chips. |
| Reduce salt (sodium) in your diet. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Try different herbs and spices like onion powder, garlic powder, oregano, basil, or cumin in place of salt. <input type="checkbox"/> Add citrus juice or vinegar for added flavor. <input type="checkbox"/> Remove the saltshaker from the table. <input type="checkbox"/> Read labels on salty foods like canned soups, frozen meals, processed meats, pre-packaged rice, breads, cheese, or condiments. Choose carefully, as different brands may have different sodium levels. <input type="checkbox"/> Choose fresh foods when possible. <input type="checkbox"/> Look for canned vegetables with no added salt and frozen vegetables without added sauces. |
| Exercise or do movement you enjoy as part of your day. Try to do weight-bearing or resistance activities at least 2 times a week. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Start exercising at home or outside by dancing while listening to music, walking while listening to an audiobook, or enjoying gardening and yardwork. <input type="checkbox"/> Take a fitness class in-person or online. <input type="checkbox"/> Do daily activities that get you moving, such as taking the stairs instead of the elevator or parking farther away from stores. |

What can I do to support metabolic health and prevent or manage diabetes?

- It is important to take care of your **metabolic health** (how your body processes food and drink into energy) during perimenopause and menopause.
- There is an increased risk for **diabetes** (a chronic condition that affects blood sugar levels), as low estrogen levels can lead to insulin resistance.
- Other conditions related to menopause - such as weight gain, increasing belly fat, osteoporosis, and sarcopenia - are also linked to changes in glucose (blood sugar) and insulin resistance.

Use the following table to see some recommendations to help with your metabolic health. Check the box next to the ones you'd like to try!

Table 4: Metabolic Health Recommendations

| Recommendation: | Things to try: |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Follow a Mediterranean-style diet. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Include olive oil in your cooking by using it to sauté vegetables.<input type="checkbox"/> Try fruit with yogurt, in smoothies, or on its own for fiber, antioxidants, and vitamins.<input type="checkbox"/> Add a portion of nuts to snacks as a source of polyphenols, antioxidants, and unsaturated fat.<input type="checkbox"/> Eat beans, peas, and lentils in salads, soups, sauces, and other dishes for fiber and potassium.<input type="checkbox"/> Eat fish high in Omega-3 fatty acids like salmon, sardines, or rainbow trout. Buy fresh or frozen fish without breading. |

| Recommendation: | Things to try: |
|---|--|
| Exercise or do movement you enjoy as part of your day. Try to do weight-bearing or resistance activities at least 2 times a week. | <input type="checkbox"/> Start taking a walk after meals to help lower your blood sugar. <input type="checkbox"/> Try a new fitness class with a friend. <input type="checkbox"/> Look for hiking trails or parks in the area to explore. <input type="checkbox"/> Swim or do water aerobics at a local pool. <input type="checkbox"/> Do household chores that get you moving like vacuuming, mopping or laundry. |
| Pair carbohydrates with protein-rich foods and fiber. | <input type="checkbox"/> Pair eggs or egg whites with whole grain toast for breakfast. <input type="checkbox"/> Try fruit with cottage cheese or a handful of nuts for a snack. <input type="checkbox"/> Use more eggs and egg whites, beans, or lean meats in a rice/noodle and vegetable stir-fry. |

What can I do to support healthy sleep, mood, and brain health, and manage symptoms like hot flashes?

- Not getting good sleep at night can lead to increased blood pressure, blood sugar, food or drink cravings, and daytime fatigue, making it harder to stay active.
- Changing hormone levels can lead to hot flashes that can impact sleep and mood. What you eat can help calm these changes.

Use the following table to see some recommendations to help with these symptoms. Check the box next to the ones you'd like to try!

Table 5: Sleep, Mood, Brain Health, and Hot Flashes Management

Recommendations

| Recommendation: | Things to try: |
|--|--|
| Eat phytoestrogens (plant compounds that act like estrogen in the body) found in soybeans, legumes, vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and flaxseed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Look for breads, crackers, and tortillas that are 100% whole grain.<input type="checkbox"/> Top yogurt, oatmeal, or cereal with fresh or frozen fruit, or add ½ cup of whole grain cereal for added crunch.<input type="checkbox"/> Buy pre-cut fruits and vegetables for an easy snack.<input type="checkbox"/> Add flaxseeds to yogurt, oatmeal, or smoothies.<input type="checkbox"/> Add beans and seeds to salads.<input type="checkbox"/> Include soy-based foods like tofu, tempeh, soy milk, or edamame in your meals. |
| Eat more polyunsaturated fatty acids, including Omega-3s. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Include a 4 ounce (oz) serving of fish or seafood in at least 2 meals per week.<input type="checkbox"/> Use nut butters spread on toast, fruit, or crackers.<input type="checkbox"/> Make your own nut mix using walnuts, almonds, and pecans.<input type="checkbox"/> Top whole grain toast, salad, or tacos with avocado.<input type="checkbox"/> Add chia seeds, ground flaxseed, or hemp hearts to smoothies or oatmeal. |
| Limit high glycemic index foods like refined carbohydrates, added sugars, and refined cereals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Swap fruit juice for whole fruits.<input type="checkbox"/> Choose whole grain cereals with no added sugar.<input type="checkbox"/> Choose products with no added sugars or sweeteners. |

| Recommendation: | Things to try: |
|---|---|
| Eat foods high in tryptophan including turkey, chicken, fish, egg whites, seeds (like pumpkin, chia, and sunflower seeds), peanuts and other nuts, soybeans, and cheese | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Serve turkey, chicken, fish, or eggs as a protein source at meals. <input type="checkbox"/> Top salads with pumpkin seeds or sunflower seeds. <input type="checkbox"/> Snack on unsalted peanuts, pistachios, and cashews. <input type="checkbox"/> Add chia seeds to smoothies, yogurt, and oatmeal. |

What are some resources for nutrition and fitness during perimenopause and menopause?

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|--|
| Virtual Nutrition Classes at U-M Health uofmhealth.org/conditions-treatments/nutrition-services/nutrition-classes |
| American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists Healthy Eating FAQs acog.org/womens-health/faqs/healthy-eating |
| Bone Health and Osteoporosis Foundation bonehealthandosteoporosis.org/healthy-bones-guide/ bonehealthandosteoporosis.org/preventing-fractures/nutrition-for-bone-health/nutrients/ |
| EWG's Consumer Guide to Seafood: Use the seafood calculator to find fish and seafood options high in omega-3 fatty acids and low in mercury: EWG.org/consumer-guides/ewgs-consumer-guide-seafood |
| AARP Virtual Community Center Exercise & Wellness Events: local.aarp.org/virtual-community-center/exercise-wellness |
| YMCA On Demand Fitness Videos: YMCAHome.ca/fitness |

To meet with a dietitian who can help you learn about nourishing yourself during menopause, please ask your doctor for a referral.

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