

Moderating menopausal symptoms

There is now good evidence that diet can affect the severity of menopausal symptoms experienced by women.

Menopause can lead to a wide variety of symptoms, including vasomotor menopausal symptoms (VMS), i.e. hot flushes and night sweats. These symptoms result from an inability to effectively control body temperature. Many women are keen to seek treatment for these symptoms. Hormone therapy is currently an effective method of addressing these symptoms, but this has a number of associated risks.

Menopausal symptoms are known to be more severe in women with high alcohol consumption, high BMI, sedentary lifestyle, and smokers. Previous evidence suggested that the inclusion of soy in the diet, along with reducing fat, could help to reduce symptoms.

The findings of this new study show that a diet rich in fruit and vegetables, and other Mediterranean-style foods (pasta, garlic and red wine), but with less meat and sweets, is associated with less severe VMS. In contrast, women with a diet rich in fat and refined sugar were more likely to experience the symptoms. This finding suggests that changes in diet could help many women to control their menopausal symptoms successfully.

The Mediterranean and fruit-based diets are also high in fibre and lower in saturated fats. This combination results in a lower concentration of oestrogen in the blood, and also less overall variation in the levels of the female hormones. It is the abrupt changes in hormone concentration that lead to the symptoms.

Diets that contained large amounts of saturated fat were associated with higher oestrogen and more severe symptoms. Diet was also found to be strongly linked to lifestyle; the women reporting an unhealthy diet were also less likely to participate in regular exercise. This may also have an effect on the severity of the symptoms.

For women looking to reduce menopausal symptoms without resorting to hormone replacement therapy, we advise increasing the amount of vegetables in the diet, while also cutting out some saturated fat, such as that found in processed foods or red meat.

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