

(Peri)Menopause: Navigating it Naturally

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METABOLIC THERAPY + FUNCTIONAL NUTRITION

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Welcome to your latest and greatest hormonal shift.

Almost nothing shakes up the foundations like heading into menopause. Suddenly everything about you feels off. It's an extreme amount of change that is difficult to navigate or prepare for - and every single person experiences it differently. Menopause has been cast with a very negative light. The thought around loss of womanliness, of aging, and of the body image concerns and hangups that can arise from this natural process of moving out of the fertile years.

Menopause: What is happening?!

As a natural part of the aging process for women, the ovaries begin slowing down the production of estrogen and progesterone.

Estrogen is produced in the ovaries, adrenal glands and fat tissues, and is responsible for female development and reproductive functions. It is what turns us into women, makes us fertile, beautiful and glowing. It also works together with calcium, vitamin D and other hormones and minerals to build bones.

Progesterone's job is really around fertility - it helps set up the uterine lining to accept a fertilized egg. In terms of menopause, progesterone is included in hormone replacement therapies for many reasons, one of the most important being to balance or oppose the effects of estrogen. Unopposed estrogen creates a strong risk for breast cancer and reproductive cancers.

During menopause, the body goes through a process of figuring out how to adjust and adapt to the new balance of hormones. This is what triggers the symptoms that are driving you crazy: hot flashes, nervous symptoms, random hair growth, weight gain, insomnia.

Facts and stats

- Average age of onset: 51 years
- Average duration: 6 to 10 years
- Typical symptoms:
 - irritability
 - hot flashes
 - emotional swings
 - headaches
 - depression
 - insomnia
 - loss of sex drive
 - weight changes
 - vaginal dryness
 - bone loss

Top Menopause Aggravators:

- Stress
- Smoking
- High toxic load
- Inflammatory diet
 - Sugar
 - Dairy
 - Wheat, flour
 - Soy
 - Processed foods; chemical additives
 - Food sensitivities
 - Antinutrients

Menopause and weight gain

An average woman seems to gain from two to five pounds relatively easily and unexpectedly during the menopausal transition; a small pouch of fat that usually ends up in the lower tummy area.

Abdominal fat is almost always related to a hormonal imbalance, and in the case of menopause, that is clearly the case! The main hormone responsible for this bit of belly fat is estrogen - specifically its decline. Fat cells in the hip, thigh and buttock areas have receptors for estrogen. Estrogen, in most women, drives most fat storage to the lower part of the body. As estrogen levels begin to decline, estrogen loses its hold on fat storage below the waist and instead, fat starts to show up in the "pinch an inch" area of the waistline.

More importantly is the relationship between the female sex hormones - estrogen and progesterone - and our chief metabolic hormones - insulin and cortisol.

These two hormones are at the root of most troubling weight gain; wellness woes; and energy, mood and appetite challenges. Understanding how insulin and cortisol's influence have shifted in your body is key to uncovering a solution to get you back on track.

Estrogen and Insulin

Estrogen is linked with insulin, the hormone responsible for shuttling fuel into our cells - I call it The Fuel Hormone, but it could also be called the Fat Storing Hormone, because any fuel your cells can't use is shuttled by insulin to the liver and stored on your abdomen as fat.

Estrogen is anti-insulin, this means that as estrogen goes away in menopause, women become more prone to insulin resistance. **We become less able to tolerate the same amount of carbohydrate than we were in our youth.**

As this weight gain starts to creep up, our first instinct is to restrict calories. In fact, calorie restriction won't help you when you're insulin resistant. You'll have to start dialling down the carbohydrate load, and choose a fuel source (fat and protein) that opens your cells back up for fuel.

Progesterone and Cortisol

Progesterone is linked with cortisol (aka The Stress Hormone). Progesterone is anti-cortisol, so as progesterone diminishes, the influence of cortisol is allowed to flourish. Cortisol is famous for placing fat around the abdomen.

When we see our abdominal weight creep up, another of our instincts in addition to eating fewer calories is to exercise more, longer, harder - burn more calories to hopefully offset this weight gain. However, overtraining is perceived by the body as a stressor, and it exacerbates the influence of the stress hormone cortisol.

A Measured Approach to Balancing the Female Sex Hormones

All of this being said, at the end of the day we're talking about a hormone reset or rebalancing. I don't mean to make this sound too overly simple, because it is a bit of work. But at the end of any hormone balancing protocol - be it metabolic hormones, adrenal hormones or sex hormones - **the results are always worth it.**

Ultimately our plan will be to a) remove the things that we know exacerbate the symptoms of menopause and then b) introduce foods, measures and approaches to help support healthy hormone balance. Sounds easy enough? Let's go.

Top Tip for Menopause #1: Exercise on the Extreme Ends of the Spectrum

Of all the suggestions that can help with the symptoms of menopause, exercise is considered to be one of the most important.

- Some kinds of exercise are famous for its **stress-busting** abilities (and managing stress is always involved in any kind of hormone reset!).
- It's well-known as an important step for **building and maintaining bone health**, which becomes important during menopause - the slowed reduction of estrogen affects our bone production.
- Outdoor exercise has an additional benefit of **shoring up vitamin D** for additional bone support.
- Exercise also helps to **mobilize stored estrogen** from fatty tissue, lessening the blow of the estrogen depletion associated with menopause.
- Cardiovascular exercise has positive implications for vasodilation and vasoconstriction - which is thought to be **at the root of many of the uncomfortable symptoms** associated with menopause arrives. These dramatic shifts are a result of a condition known as vasomotor:

from www.livestrong.com:

Hot Flashes

Of all the vasomotor symptoms involving menopause, hot flashes are by far the most common. With the sudden drop of estrogen, the hypothalamus, a small segment of the brain located near its base, has some difficulty regulating the temperature of your body. This usually causes a sudden, sometimes overwhelming, sensation of warmth within your skin. If this vasomotor symptom is severe, you'll tend to undergo this feeling much more frequently and intensely, even to the point where it disrupts your daily life.

Flushing

Often accompanying these hot flashes is the vasomotor symptom of flushing, which is an abrupt reddening to the skin. The increase in body temperature causes the blood vessels nearer the skin to dilate, increasing blood flow to the affected areas of the body and causing this flushed appearance. With more severe vasomotor symptoms, the frequency of the flushing is at a much higher rate.

Perspiration

Another common vasomotor symptom is perspiration. Much like flushing, sweating is typically associated with hot flashes. But when the severity of your symptoms is high, you'll undergo much more excessive periods of perspiration.

Night Sweats

It's also normal to experience menopausal night sweats, which are basically hot flashes that happen while you're asleep. With this vasomotor symptom, you undergo an elevation in body temperature that triggers excessive sweating that wakes you from your slumber. Severe night sweats may drench your sheets, cause insomnia and occur a number of times during the night. They may even prompt some nausea.

Heart Palpitations

If vasodilation or vasoconstriction occurs within the blood vessels to your heart, you'll experience heart palpitations. In this situation, the drop in hormones could momentarily increase or decrease the amount of blood flowing to your heart, triggering a rapid or pounding heart beat.

Dizziness

Menopause may also cause the vasomotor symptom of dizziness or lightheadedness. Vasoconstriction of the blood vessels to the brain decreases the amount of oxygen transported to this area of your body, resulting in a passing sensation of dizziness or lightheadedness. When this symptom is severe, it's more inclined to occur on frequent basis and could even cause you to faint.

Cardiovascular fitness becomes increasingly important during this stage of your life - heart health will help manage the vasomotor response. Make daily cardiovascular exercise a habit.

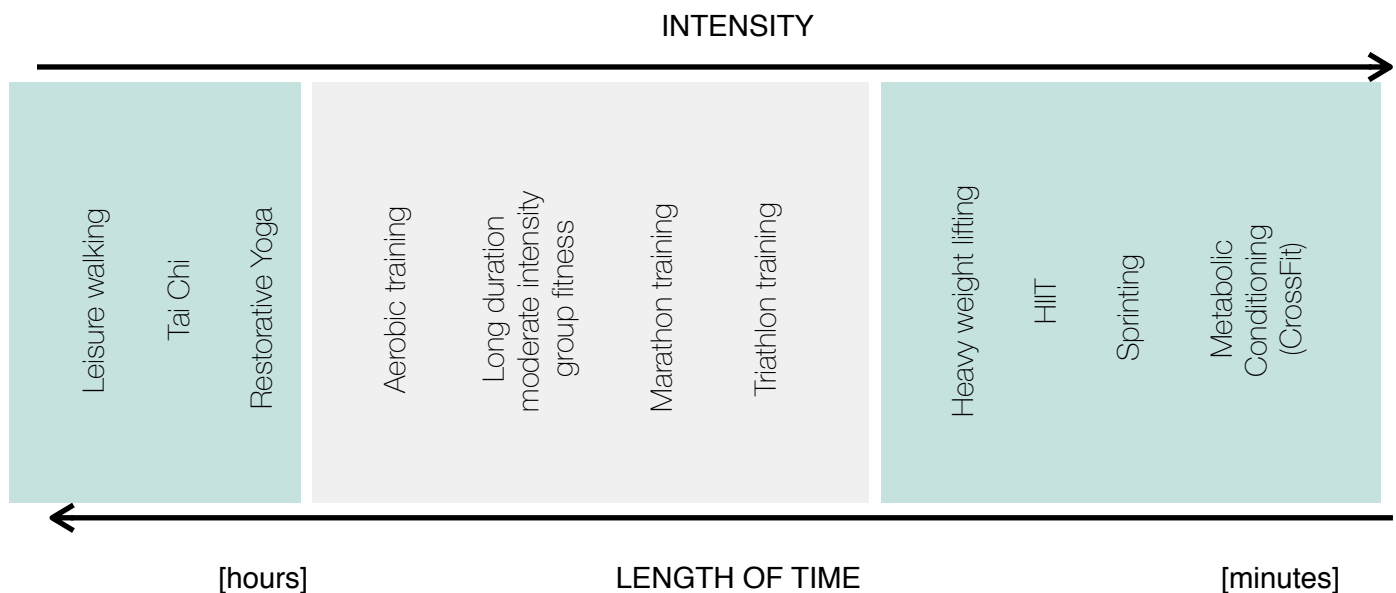
How to Exercise to Support you through Menopause

Forget everything you know about exercise. Things change dramatically at this stage in life.

In order to help manage the metabolic hormonal influence of menopause, we need to exercise in ways that help promote insulin function without adding the stress of overtraining. This puts us at the extreme ends of the fitness spectrum.

On the low end of intensity, things like leisure walking, tai chi, restorative yoga and meditation help reduce the effects of cortisol. These are longer in duration but the intensity output is next to nothing.

On the high end of the intensity spectrum, workouts like sprinting, MetCon and High Intensity Anaerobic Training help boost male sex hormones like testosterone and Growth Hormone, which help to mitigate the effects of your diminishing female sex hormones.



Top Tip for Menopause #2: Clean up the Toxic Load

The body has enough to deal with during the hormonal shift of menopause without having to deal with a high toxic load too. Generally speaking, removing toxins from the diet is good - albeit vague - advice. But during a massive transition like menopause, we need to keep things simple for the system.

Eat a whole foods, anti-inflammatory diet:

Choose organic produce to mellow out the toxic load. Note that organic fruits and vegetables are not free of toxins; they simply are coated with toxins from an approved list, which means they may have slightly less harmful effects on the body. At any rate, you should be washing your produce before eating.

Quality proteins. Grass-fed, pasture-raised, free-range, wild caught, organic... These protein sources are better than commercial proteins because the animals have been eating a diet relatively free of toxins too.

Avoid commercial fats. The commercial seed and grain oils used in most processed food, junk food and restaurant food are toxic, antinutrient and push our Omega-3 fatty acid ratio out of balance, creating an environment of inflammation in the body.

Choose healthy fats. Healthy sources of fat have the amazing power to restore the balance of anti-inflammatory Omega-3 fatty acids.

Eliminate toxins and antinutrients:

Antinutrients aren't just "not really nutritious..." They actually actively rob our bodies of nutrition.

The most well-known include:

- Excessive caffeine
- Nicotine
- Sugar
- Simple/refined carbohydrates (breads, pastas, pastries)
- Prescription drugs
- Food additives, preservatives, emulsifiers
- Ingested chemicals of all types - dyes, pesticides, fertilizers
- Contaminated water
- Industrial seed oils: like canola, soybean, corn, safflower, etc
- Genetically modified foods - plant or animal
- Food sensitivities
- Free radicals from rancid or oxidized food like spoiled cooking oils, charred/burnt/overcooked foods, etc.

Reduce or remove your exposure to **airborne and lifestyle toxins**, including:

- Smoke
- Vehicle/machinery emissions
- Gasoline
- Paints, glues
- Chemical cleaners
- Nail polish & perfumes
- Chemical-based personal care products - soaps, lotions, etc.

(You can learn more about the woes of chronic inflammation in the [8 Weeks to Effortless program](#).)

Of special note: Xenoestrogens

Xenoestrogens are chemical compounds that mimic estrogen in the body. They float through the blood stream and bind to the estrogen receptors of cells - inhibiting actual estrogen from binding there. This is of tremendous importance during a time when your estrogen levels are already diminished and continuing to fade: what estrogen is left in the body becomes even less available or useable. Symptoms associated with diminished estrogen worsen and become less manageable. There are also implications for women's cancers - breast, uterine.

Typical sources of xenoestrogens include:

- Fruits and vegetables sprayed with pesticides
- Plastic water bottles and food containers
- Personal care items:
 - nail polish
 - makeup
 - lotions
- Household cleaning products

As part of your toxic clean-up it is strongly encouraged to begin to reduce your exposure to xenoestrogens.

To summarize: Just eat clean, whole foods. Food without ingredients. This is your absolute best bet to avoid the xenoestrogens, hormones and antibiotics - the inflammatory things that directly affect how your body will manage this period of time. Surround yourself with as much natural energy as you can and avoid man-made products wherever possible. Learn how to make your own cleaning products and personal care products.

Top Tip for Menopause #3: De-emphasize Carbohydrate and Insulinogenic Foods

Difficulty with insulin in menopause means we need to start paying more attention to things that cause our blood glucose and insulin to spike uncontrollably - even if these things never actually affected us much in the past. This includes the obvious bad carbs like sugar and starches, but also includes things like fruit and dairy, which are very insulinogenic - that is, despite any perceived health benefits, these types of foods digest down immediately into sugar in the blood stream and create insulin havoc.

Insulin's main job is to shuttle fuel into the cells tholepin run our bodies. When cells become resistant to insulin due to chronic or heavy carbohydrate/sugar load, insulin then moves that sugar to the liver where it covered it to abdominal fat for storage.

The best way to fix this, is to dial down carbohydrate and switch instead to a more insulin-stabilizing source of fuel, like fat and protein.

(The [8 Weeks to Effortless program](#) is designed to help you regain control of insulin function.)

Top Tip for Menopause #4: Get Stress and Sleep on Track

Stress has an overwhelming effect on hormonal balance. In most natural wellness circles, we know that any intervention we suggest for or clients or patients will be have greatly reduced efficacy if stress is allowed to linger. And: poor quality sleep is one of the great stressors of our life. We need to appreciate and understand just how important sleep and stress are to the functioning of our bodies.

The star of our stress response is **cortisol**, often lovingly referred to as "the stress hormone." This is the hormone that performs the shutdown functions of the stress response: where adrenaline switches on certain bodily systems to turn us into reactive and responsive balls of energy, cortisol is the hormone that switches off some of the functions that aren't immediately needed. When you are not getting restful sleep and when you are burdened by chronic stressors, cortisol becomes and remains elevated.

The constant release of cortisol prolongs this shutdown, and that's where things start to turn bad for us.

- **Immune function runs at a below-optimal level.** That's why you get sick much more easily when you're run down and under stress.
- **Digestive function is reduced.** Not only do you feel the effects of indigestion, but you are unable to properly digest and extract nutrients from food. There is no way to feel optimally happy and healthy when you're not getting nutrients into your cells.
- **The brain is impacted.** Memory suffers, brain fog persists.
- Eventually **adrenal fatigue** can happen when cortisol secretion goes on for far too long.

At a time when you are already going through a tumultuous and traumatic body shift, the last thing you need is this chronic stress response getting in your way of effortless health and happiness. Managing stress is a loaded topic, one that practitioners have only begun to scratch the surface of.

Nutritional Support for Menopause

So, we've got this dialled in: an anti-inflammatory, clean, whole foods diet free of toxins. I think we've covered that off in great detail. Let's talk about some specific nutrients to help support you through this time:

What about Calcium?

Let's get this out of the way first since it's the question on every menopausal woman's mind. You are worried about your bone health and with good reason: estrogen has a very important role in bone health and development, and your estrogen levels are slowly declining. Many nutrition clients take this as a cue to start drinking tons of milk. Others, realizing that milk is actually not that good for us, begin to worry that they "aren't getting enough calcium."

I wanted to take a moment to quickly point out that **the calcium in milk and milk products is not bioavailable to humans**. This means that, yes, there is calcium in milk... but we can't actually use it for much of anything. Drinking milk will not directly help your bone health. Furthermore, calcium is only one component that helps build bones. Drinking a glass full of calcium will only get you so far if your magnesium, Vitamin K and Vitamin D levels are too low to help mobilize the calcium into bone-building action.

Calcium supplementation has come under fire recently too - it's been discovered that most commercial calcium supplements are also not bioavailable, and have no benefit to bone health.

Eating calcium-rich foods does, though. The calcium that is found abundantly in leafy green vegetables, for example, is extremely useable by our bodies.

From whfoods.com:

World's Healthiest Foods rich in calcium		
Food	Cals	DRI/DV
Tofu	164	77%
Sardines	189	35%
Sesame Seeds	206	35%
Yogurt	149	30%
Collard Greens	63	27%
Spinach	41	24%
Cheese	114	20%
Turnip Greens	29	20%
Mustard Greens	36	17%
Beet Greens	39	16%

Please note: on this list tofu (a soy product), and yogurt & cheese (dairy products) are off-limits to you as they are antinutrients

Additional good sources of calcium include:

- swiss chard
- kale
- bok choy
- cinnamon
- cabbage
- broccoli
- brussels sprouts

Supplements to help support menopause symptoms

If ever there was a time to dial up your supplement intake, now would be the time to do it. Try to avoid HRT (see below) by shoring up the nutrients that specifically support this hormonal shift and its symptoms.

Black cohosh

The phytonutrients in this herb have been shown to have positive implications on endocrine function - the system of the body responsible for producing, secreting and regulating hormones. It has been prescribed in some countries in lieu of hormone replacement therapy (HRT). In Canada, it is available without a prescription. In studies, it has been shown to specifically reduce hot flashes, night sweats and sleep disturbances.

B complex

The B vitamins are known for their brain-supporting role. In the case of menopause, they help support the pituitary gland, which is responsible for regulating the ovaries. **Vitamin B6** is especially implicated in menopause support.

Bone health complex

There exists on the market some supplement cocktails that factor in calcium, magnesium, Vitamin K, Vitamin D and other bone-supporting nutrients. Remember that calcium does not work alone in building better bones, so these other nutrients need to be considered.

Omega-3 fatty acid (fish or flaxseed oil)

Fish oil has many great properties but where menopause is concerned it has been shown to help balance estrogen. Everyone should be taking a fish oil anyway; here is just one more good reason to get on board.

HRT: Hormone Replacement Therapy?

The idea behind HRT is to replace the dwindling estrogen with a synthetic version. There are a lot of issues with HRT, not the least of which being that it is obviously “playing God” with a natural process that is meant to happen in the body. If you feel that hormone therapy may be something you would like try, I can suggest that you seek out a health care practitioner that deals with **natural, bioidentical hormone therapy**. These hormones come with less risk and fewer side effects, because they behave in the body the same way that your natural hormones do.

Lifestyle Support for Menopause

We've already learned a few things:

- Improve sleep
- Manage stress
- Exercise daily

Here's one more:

Manage expectations and go easy on yourself

A nutritionist can help you manage some of the symptoms with diet, exercise and lifestyle tips. Managing the emotional half of this transition will take some deeper work from you.

By the time you reach menopause - an inevitability, by the way; something you have no control over and which happens to us all! - you have acquired a rich and fulfilling life history. You are prouder and wiser. It can be tough to focus on self-acceptance and emotional well being when your body feels like it has a life of its own, and is gaining weight and just getting harder to manage in general.

Women feel less attractive as they reach menopause. The media tells mature women to focus on "slowing down the ravages of time", and "reducing telltale signs of aging". These messages affect our ideas about ourselves.

So what's the answer? Stop listening. Celebrate your life so far and all the life left. You can promote peace between your mind and body during this complex life transition.

Cheesy but true.

