

## Nutrition and Health for Women at Midlife

Nutrition is important for women at midlife as dietary intake can play a role in the development, and in the management and prevention of a range of different health issues that may occur at this time. These conditions include:

- cardiovascular disease
- high blood pressure
- cancer
- osteoporosis
- arthritis
- type 2 diabetes
- weight gain
- fatigue
- depression and mood swings
- constipation
- hot flushes

### What is the problem?

Nutrition related problems may be caused by not eating *enough* health promoting foods, eating *too much* food high in saturated fat, sugar and salt or an energy imbalance where, the amount of food eaten is greater than the amount of energy expended by the body (i.e. too much food and not enough activity). Before you spend a lot of money on special 'health foods' or supplements, it is important to understand the basics regarding healthy eating (see '*Healthy Eating for You*' fact sheet for more information).

### What can be done?

The following are nutritional tips for good health for all Australians, which are based on current research.

**Eat a variety of foods:** The greater variety of foods consumed each day the more chance you have of obtaining the nutrients your body requires for optimal health.

**Eat at least 5 different vegetables and 2 pieces of fresh fruit every day:** Vegetables are particularly important, especially the brightly coloured ones.

**Include wholegrain foods daily:** Eat at least 2 serves of wholegrain foods daily, such as wholemeal or wholegrain breads, oats or brown rice.

**Include essential fatty acids:** You can include essential fatty acids (the good fats that we need but cannot make in our body) by eating oily fish such as tuna or salmon, as well as seeds and nuts (preferably raw and unsalted), or cold-pressed oils such as sunflower or olive oil.

**Reduce saturated and trans fats:** choose lean cuts of meat and trim any remaining fat off, remove the skin off chicken, use low-fat dairy products and avoid hidden animal fats in biscuits and pastries.

**Increase calcium:** Try to include at least three serves of low-fat dairy products each day. Good sources of calcium include low fat yoghurt, milk and cheese. Calcium is also contained in small amounts in green leafy vegetables, tofu, fish, nuts and seeds.

**Choose foods low in salt:** Avoid adding salt to your food and eating foods that contain large amounts of sodium (salt).

**Limit alcohol:** Alcohol consumption has many potential health risks and is also high in kilojoules. If you choose to drink, limit your alcohol intake to one or two standard drinks per day. A standard drink is 100mL of wine, 30mL of spirit or 285mL of full-strength beer.

**Try to prevent excess weight gain:** This is best done by balancing food intake with physical activity.

### Health conditions and nutrition

There are a variety of common health problems faced by women at midlife, which can be helped by eating particular foods. It is important to talk to your general practitioner if you think you are affected by any of the following conditions.

**Anaemia (low iron levels):** Irregular menstrual cycles or increased blood loss can lead to low iron levels in women. Iron is important for the production of haemoglobin, which transports oxygen around the body. Having low levels can make you feel breathless and tired. Try to include small serves of lean red meat regularly in your diet. Other sources of iron include chicken, fish, fortified cereals, egg yolks, nuts and legumes. If you don't eat meat, take care to increase your vitamin C consumption at meal times as this will help to improve iron absorption from plant foods.

**Bowel problems:** As we get older the large bowel tends to slow down and many people experience constipation. To counteract this you may need to boost your fibre and fluid intake. Make sure you include wholegrain cereals, fruit, legumes, nuts, seeds, vegetables and drink 6-8 glasses of water each day.

**High blood pressure:** Blood pressure may rise around midlife in many women. It is important to maintain a healthy weight, be physically active and reduce your salt intake. Make sure you remove salt from cooking and choose foods that are lower in salt by checking labels (see *'Reading Food Labels'* fact sheet for more information). As around 75% of our salt intake comes from processed foods, reduce your intake of these foods and consume fresh foods where possible.

**Heart problems:** Cholesterol and triglyceride (blood fats or lipids) levels in the blood commonly increase during our 40s and 50s, increasing the risk of heart disease (see *'Heart Health and Women'* fact sheet for more information). Make sure you reduce the level of saturated fats (from animal sources) you consume and instead use mono and polyunsaturated oils, such as olive oil and sunflower oil, as well as omega 3 fats from fish and nuts. Plant sterols are the fats found in small amounts in foods such as nuts, legumes, grains and cereals. Additionally there is a range of foods now fortified with plant sterols such as breakfast cereals, margarine, low fat yoghurt and milk. Consuming these foods regularly as part of a healthy diet may also assist in lowering LDL (bad) cholesterol.

**Hot flushes:** Soy, linseed and other foods containing phytoestrogens have helped some women with hot flushes, and there is no harm in including these foods in your diet. Ultimately, it is preferable to get nutritional benefits directly from the natural foods themselves rather than supplements.

**Osteoporosis:** According to the Australian Nutrition Survey, approximately 90 percent of women in Australia do not have enough calcium in their diet. As well as this, many women have low levels of Vitamin D, which can increase the risk of osteoporosis and fractures. Around the time of menopause there is a loss of calcium from bones, which further increases the risk of osteoporosis. It is important to include at least three serves of calcium rich dairy or a calcium enriched substitute each day. If you are unable to consume these foods, talk to your general practitioner about other ways you can protect your bones (see *'Bone Health – Preventing Osteoporosis'* fact sheet for more information).

**Mood:** Sometimes when we feel anxious, irritable or depressed, our diet changes as well. During these times, skipping meals, eating non-nutritious foods or snacking on sweet foods are common. If you are experiencing mood problems, it's important to talk to your general practitioner to be properly assessed and treated if necessary. To help improve mood, eat regular, healthy meals. Have meals prepared in advance in the fridge or freezer, so that when you're feeling low you don't have to prepare anything. Including oily fish (good source of omega 3) regularly may also help. It is important to avoid sudden, strict, or fad dieting, which may make the problem worse.

**Weight gain:** Women at midlife often experience an increase in weight, especially weight around the abdomen, which leads to an increased waist circumference. This puts you at risk for health conditions such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, arthritis and some types of cancer. Therefore, it is important to try to prevent weight gain at midlife. See your general practitioner or a dietitian if you need assistance and support in maintaining a healthy weight (see *'Weight Gain Prevention for Women'* fact sheet for more information).

### Where can I get more information?

[www.jeanhailes.org.au](http://www.jeanhailes.org.au)

[www.managingmenopause.org.au](http://www.managingmenopause.org.au)

[www.nutritionaustralia.org](http://www.nutritionaustralia.org) – Nutrition Australia (see website for contact numbers in each state)

[www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) – Better Health Channel 1800 126 637

[www.osteoporosis.org.au](http://www.osteoporosis.org.au) – Osteoporosis Australia

[www.heartfoundation.org.au](http://www.heartfoundation.org.au) – Heart Foundation 1300 36 27 87

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This fact sheet is designed to be informative and educational. It is not intended to provide specific medical advice or replace advice from your health practitioner.

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