

## In Your 40s? Food to help you feel good as your body changes

*Imogen Watson, dietitian and medical nutrition manager at global healthcare company Abbott, explains what you should be eating to help you feel your best at any age, from head to toe.*

Getting older isn't one size fits all; it affects every woman differently both physically and emotionally. However, nutrition can play a key role in helping you maintain your health and wellbeing at every stage in life, including menopause and beyond.

### **Eat to beat the blues**

Firstly, don't panic if you're feeling a little out of sorts. It's completely natural for women going through the menopause to experience a roller coaster of feelings, whether it's PMS, bouts of the blues, tiredness or difficulty concentrating. Sounds fun right? Interestingly, low levels of both vitamin B12 and omega-3 can actually increase our feelings of low mood or even anxiety. To combat this, stock up on foods rich in these nutrients, including oily fish, whole grains and flaxseed oil, which could help to reduce mood changes and tension. Team this with exercise to boost your 'feel-good' endorphins and help keep you smiling.

### **Boost your brain health**

Some memory loss or confusion can be a common side effect of the natural ageing process, however what we eat can have an impact on cognitive function as we age. Opt for foods packed with lutein, a pigment found in many fruit and vegetables like green leafy vegetables and carrots. A recent study by Abbott showed that older people who eat more foods containing lutein have a greater ability to retain and use information that they have acquired throughout their lives.

Vitamin E is naturally found in parts of the brain that are linked to memory, vision and language development so it's important that we get some from our diet to support brain health. Adults should aim for at least 30mg of vitamin E every day, so pack your plate with veggies like spinach or asparagus, seafood, or snack on a cup of sunflower seeds throughout the day. Omega-3s can also play a critical role in looking after an ageing brain. However unlike some nutrients, these fatty acids do not occur naturally in the body so it's important to incorporate healthy omega-3 rich foods like oily fish and linseeds into your diet.

### **Nourish your skin**

As the body's largest organ, the skin faces as many changes as the rest of the body as we age, and don't we know it! A natural reduction of elastin causes skin to hang more loosely, which in addition to the thinning of the surface layer of the skin, means mature skin can lose that fresh, dewy look. Fight this with foods full of antioxidants, including brightly coloured fruit and vegetables, to help make skin stronger from the inside, and opt for those omega-3s again. These nifty fats influence collagen production, helping skin stay plump and youthful looking.

## Fuel your muscles

It's not all about pumping iron. From the age of 40 we start losing up to eight percent of muscle mass per decade, which can lead to a loss of strength, an increased risk of falls and fractures, and understandably, a reduction in quality of life. As we age, we actually need more protein than when we're younger (approximately 0.75g/kg body weight for a healthy adult; that's 45g of protein per day for an adult weighing 60kg) and the heavier we are, the more protein we need to eat too. That's because our body doesn't process protein and other nutrients as efficiently as it used to. Try and include two portions of high protein foods a day to ensure your menopausal muscles are tip top, including lean meats and fish, eggs and cheese, as well as veggie options like beans, lentils, nuts and grains.

In addition to protein, make sure your diet is high in vitamin D, which helps maintain normal muscle function. The majority of our vitamin D stores come from spending approximately 15 minutes in the sun, between 11am and 3pm from April to October, face and forearms uncovered where possible. If this is tricky to achieve, there are a few foods that contain the elusive vitamin, including oily fish, eggs and fortified breakfast cereals. You should also consider taking a daily supplement, especially in the dark depths of winter.

## Be heart aware

During the menopause, a woman's risk of developing heart disease increases to the same level as that of a man of the same age. The good news is that there are some simple things we can do to keep our hearts healthy. Eating less saturated and trans fats found in processed meat, crisps and biscuits; fewer foods high in sugar like cakes and chocolate; enjoying heart healthy fats in foods like avocado, unsalted nuts and oily fish; eating plenty of fibre every day; and keeping active are all great ways to look after your ticker.

## Keep your bones strong

You'll probably have noticed a number of changes since leaving your 30s behind, but did you know that from the age of 35, when our bone mass peaks, there is a slow loss of calcium from our bones? This loss increases during the menopause because of the body's natural loss of oestrogen. To combat this, women need to make sure they're eating enough calcium to keep their bones healthy. Aim for two to three portions of calcium rich foods a day, such as 200ml of semi skimmed milk, a matchbox size piece of cheese or a small yoghurt.

## Boost your metabolism

We all dread the middle-age spread and it transpires weight gain post menopause is a very real phenomenon. Due to a decrease in lean muscle as part of the natural ageing process, which causes our metabolic rate to drop, it becomes harder to control our weight post the big 40, as hormone levels fluctuate and we gradually become less active too.

Boost your metabolism by eating smaller, more frequent meals throughout the day to help balance blood sugar levels. Lean protein is also key to keeping you satisfied so fill up on lean meat, oily fish and pulses like peas, beans and lentils to reduce the likelihood you'll sneak to the biscuit tin at 4pm.

It's not just about what you eat. Keeping active as you age can also help maintain your weight and mood. With 80 per cent of adults not meeting the government targets for moderate exercise, strength training is a great way to help control weight and build muscle mass. Time to dust off those dumbbells!

There's no two ways about it, your body will change as you age. However, whether you're in your 40s, 50s, 60s or beyond, good nutrition can help you stay feeling like you. So next time you're stocking up on groceries, remember these staple foods to help you feel well so you can continue to do all the things in life you love.