



Institute for Women's Health Research

Putting Women's Health First

March 2012

In This Issue

Healthy Eating

Upcoming Events

Health Tip

Related Blogs

[Why is it harder for women to lose weight?](#)

[What are whole grains?](#)

[Add fiber now, avoid heart disease later](#)

Dear Friends,

Low-carb. High fiber. Low fat. Antioxidants. Natural. Organic. Grass Fed. Farm Raised. Everywhere we look, we receive the latest messages on the foods we eat and why we should be eating them. Conversely, but with comparable magnitude, we are bombarded with information on what foods we should be avoiding. When it comes to nutrition, making healthy, informed decisions is often overwhelming and simply frustrating. The food we eat plays a significant role in disease prevention and overall well-being, and acts as fuel for the body to function at its best. As consumers and as women, getting the facts on what our bodies need is crucial, especially with obesity and cardiovascular disease on the rise.

This month's e-newsletter discusses the role of diet in maintaining a healthy life and preventing disease.

Sincerely,

The Institute staff



INSTITUTE FOR
WOMEN'S HEALTH
RESEARCH™

AT NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

HEALTHY EATING

Not everyone has the same nutritional needs. Dietary restrictions, health conditions, age, and lifestyle are all components that influence an optimal diet for an individual. For women in particular, new studies emerge daily that offer novel options for eating well at the various stages of life. For





example, childbearing years call for additional nutrients and folic acid, and many health professionals recommend additional vitamin D for bone health during menopausal years due to the increased risk of osteoporosis. Additionally, for women predisposed to conditions such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and diabetes due to lifestyle or heredity, a diet low in fat and sugar and rich in vegetables and whole grains may not only be beneficial, but necessary.

Nutrition and Disease Prevention

Numerous studies tout the benefits of nutrition for disease prevention, but the findings change often and facts can seem difficult to nail down. Here's what current research is showing in the conversation on nutrition and disease in women's health:

- **Stroke:** Stroke is one of the leading causes of death for Americans but recent research on stroke and nutrition shows that consumption of flavonoids might reduce stroke risk. Flavonoids are plant-synthesized compounds found in many vegetables, fruits, and dark chocolate and many researchers "[They are] thought to provide some of that protection through several mechanisms, including improved blood vessel function and an anti-inflammatory effect," stated the lead author on a recent study (1). According to the research, eating fruits and vegetables, and increasing the intake of citrus and vitamin C are two ways to decrease the risk of stroke. Or, try coffee! In a study of coffee drinking and associated stroke risk for women, those who drank 1-5 cups per day had a 25% decreased risk for stroke.(2)



- **Cardiovascular disease:** As reported by recent research on heart health and fish consumption, eating fish can combat heart disease for women young and old. In one particular study, young women who did not eat fish had three times the risk for heart disease compared to women who ate fish every week (3). In a related study, older women eating 5 or more servings of broiled or baked fish per week had a 30% lower risk for heart failure than did women eating 1 or less servings of fish per month (4). The researchers noted that these results did not apply to fried fish, which actually increases the risk of heart problems. In addition to fish, dark chocolate can make for a healthy heart. Like many fruits, dark chocolate contains flavonoids, which have an antioxidant affect that promotes cardiovascular health. (5)
- **Osteoporosis:** Bone health is of great concern as women age, particularly for women entering menopause (ages 35-60) and beyond when bone density is threatened due to changes in estrogen levels. Bone loss can be reduced by increasing vitamin D intake through supplements. A daily intake between 500 and 800 IU, with or without calcium, has been shown to increase bone mineral density in older women (mean age of 63 years) (6). For women over age 65, vitamin D benefits increase with intakes of 800 to 900 IU (daily). Or, grab some prunes. Research by a group from Florida State and Oklahoma State University found that postmenopausal women that consumed dried plums had higher bone density in the spine and the ulna (one of two bones of the forearm) compared to a group

that ate dried apples (7). The lead author on the study noted, "All fruits and vegetables have a positive effect on nutrition, but in terms of bone health, this particular food is exceptional."

- **Breast Cancer:** No research supports any specific diet to prevent a cancer diagnoses but paying attention to nutrition for weight management might help when it comes to the risk of breast cancer recurrence. Some research suggests that recurrence is more likely for women who gain weight after a breast cancer diagnosis.



The National Cancer Institute's [guidelines](#) for cancer prevention include: increasing the intake of fruits, vegetables and whole grains, decreasing fat intake to less than 30 percent of calories, minimizing intake of cured, pickled, and smoked foods, maintaining a healthy weight, and minimizing or eradicating alcohol consumption. Though following these guidelines does not guarantee living cancer-free, eating a low-fat diet rich in whole grains

and vegetables and limiting alcohol use will certainly improve overall health.

- **Brain Health:** Continuing research suggests that diet also has a major affect on mental health. Mediterranean diets-those rich in vegetables, nuts, grains, and plant-derived fats such as olive oil-are not only delicious, but are thought to combat depression and decrease the risk of Alzheimer's disease and other cognitive impairment. In one study, participants eating such a diet were nearly 30% less likely to suffer from depression compared to participants eating diets heavy with meat and dairy. Even coffee appears to do more than just power us through the morning: A 2011 study showed that women who drink 2-3 cups per day have a 15% less risk for depression than women who drink less than 1 cup per day. (8)

Munching during Menopause

The transition through menopause can be uncomfortable and challenging for many women and may demand extra attention to nutrition. The reduction of estrogen during menopause creates a greater risk of developing health problems such as heart disease and osteoporosis that can be reduced through diet.

Though there are known benefits to taking vitamin D and other supplements, many other natural menopause remedies thought to alleviate symptoms such as hot flash discomfort have no reliable research proving their effectiveness. Results from alternative therapy research-such as the use of flaxseed or soy for hot flash treatment-are typically inconclusive or show no significant symptom difference for menopausal women versus those who do not.

In one study from the University of Miami on soy product use to alleviate menopause symptoms, researchers found the products no more effective than placebos. "Women should be reconsidering taking these types of products for menopausal health," said the lead author on the study (9).

In another study on flaxseed oil and its potential for hot flash relief, women were randomly assigned to eat a flaxseed bar or a fiber bar. There



was no significant difference between the groups when it came to their hot flash experience (10). Further, flaxseed can have some unpleasant side effects, such as bloating, diarrhea, and nausea. Another common alternative medicine is black cohosh, a plant from which teas, extracts, and capsules are often made. Results from research on black cohosh use in menopause symptom treatment are mixed, and the safety of long-term use is unknown.

Though research is lacking on the use of natural remedies during menopause, it doesn't hurt to eat more fruits and vegetables, to avoid high-sodium processed foods (such as boxed cookies, crackers, canned soups), and to increase vitamin D and calcium intake during the menopausal transition. The severity of symptoms during menopause varies from woman to woman, and experts warn not to trust treatment methods that have limited evidence to support their effectiveness. Adhering to a balanced diet is a proven method of improving overall health, and can make the menopausal transition a bit more comfortable.

Weight Loss

Annually, losing weight is one of the top New Years' Resolutions and weight management industry is a lucrative one. Both men and women struggle with weight, and obesity is a reality for many Americans and remains an ongoing threat. A sizable



portion of the American Heart Association's Strategic Impact Goals for the next decade to 2020 is dedicated to lowering the percentage of obesity diagnoses through better access to nutritious foods, places to exercise, and educational support programs that center around healthy eating and physical activity. While the AHA will surely help improve the overall health of many Americans, there are small things we can do on an individual basis to maintain a healthy weight.

For women at any age, weight loss can be a confounding endeavor. Female metabolism slows as we get older and maintaining an ideal weight can become increasingly tricky. During stages such as menopause and pregnancy, weight gain is common and expected, but significant weight gain that increases Body Mass Index (BMI) to an unhealthy level increases risk of heart disease, diabetes, and high blood pressure. Maintaining a healthy weight is necessary to protect against such diseases, and might even protect against endometrial cancer: In one study by the American Cancer Society, researchers found that postmenopausal women who gained significant weight or "yo-yo" dieted (gaining/losing 10 or more pounds in a cyclical fashion over time) were nearly four times more likely to be at risk for endometrial cancer than were women who maintained a stable weight (11).

For weight maintenance, proper nutrition is crucial. Many women gain weight during menopausal years due to the physical changes associated with hormone fluctuation. Experts recommend eating a diet rich in vegetables, high-protein grains such as quinoa, and nutrient-rich fruits to allow the body to use food as fuel instead of storing it as fat. Further, add in some physical activity. Pairing good nutrition with regular exercise promotes metabolic activity, muscle development, cardiovascular health, and bone health. Sensible weight loss, while often a conundrum, is accessible. See the Health Tip for some specific weight management ideas.

Sources:

- (1) Cassidy, et al. *Stroke*. February 2012
- (2) Larsson, et al. *Stroke*. 2011
- (3) Strom et al. *Hypertension*. 2012
- (4) Belin et al. *Circ Heart Fail*. 2011
- (5) *Science Daily*. 2012.
- (6) Malabanan et al. *Journal of Women's Health*.
- (7) Shirin et al. *British Journal of Nutrition*. 2011
- (8) Lucas et al. *Arch Intern Med*. 2011
- (9) Levis, Silvina et al. *Arch Intern Med*. 2011
- (10) Pruthi et al. *J Clinic Oncol*. 2011
- (11) American Association for Cancer Research. 2011

UPCOMING EVENTS

March 6, 2012, 12:00pm-1:00pm

[Women's Heart Matters: Metabolic Boot Camp](#)

Prentice Women's Hospital, Chicago, Illinois

March 13, 2012, 12:00pm-1pm

[Women's Heart Matters: What My Stress Test Says](#)

Prentice Women's Hospital, Chicago, Illinois

March 20, 2011, 12:00pm-1:00pm

[IWHR Monthly Research Forum: Special Needs of Women with Neurological Conditions](#)

Prentice Women's Hospital, Chicago, Illinois

HEALTH TIP

Want to lose weight? Here are some tips to get you started:



- Eat Breakfast. Starting the day off with a protein-rich meal can set you on the right track for the rest of the day, boosting energy and brain power. Try something protein-rich like egg whites, whole-wheat toast with natural peanut butter, and a banana. Wash it down with antioxidant-rich coffee or, alternatively, tea.
- Take Time. Research shows that mindfully eating a meal is related to decreased BMI, increased satisfaction and identifiable feelings of fullness. Try setting aside a reasonable amount of time to enjoy a meal if you find yourself rushing or eating on the go.
- Increase fruit and vegetable intake. Eating whole foods such as fruits and vegetables promotes the body's ability to use essential nutrients for fuel, with less energy being stored as fat. Try adding a high fiber, delicious fruit such as an apple to breakfast each morning. The fiber will fill you up, and research has shown that eating apples can help lower cholesterol.
- Attend Northwestern Women's Integrative Wellness Conference. Interested in learning more about healthy lifestyle changes and holistic health? Attend this event on April 7. For more information and to register, click [HERE](#).

SAVE THE DATE!

On May 15, 2012, the Institute will be hosting a special event to celebrate National Women's Health Week from 11am-2pm at the Prentice Women's Hospital in Chicago, Illinois. This event will give researchers and clinicians the opportunity to showcase their latest findings in women's health research, as well as give the public an opportunity to learn about the women's health services Northwestern University and other Chicago area clinics have to offer! In order to submit an abstract for the research poster session, please visit our [website](#). If you would like more information about exhibiting your clinic, please contact Lauren Ataman at 312-503-1385 or by email at instwhr@northwestern.edu.

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