
Healthy eating for women in midlife

As you get older you need fewer calories, but your need for other nutrients remains unchanged. Healthy eating means getting the right balance of nutrients, as well as balancing calories taken in with those burnt up by activity.

Healthy eating can help prevent or delay health problems that become more common as we age. Common health problems for women in midlife include type 2 diabetes, heart disease, cancer, hypertension (high blood pressure) and constipation.

In midlife, you need to make what you eat count. There is little room for less nutritious, empty-calorie high-fat or high-sugar food, as you are not burning off as many calories as you used to.

Eating well in midlife

Guidelines to ensure you have an adequate diet in midlife:

- **Eat a wide range of foods**, covering all food groups – this way you are less likely to get too much or too little of anything.
- Eat at least three meals per day – it's difficult to cram the nutrients you need in a day into just one or two meals (research shows that people who eat **breakfast** are less likely to be overweight).
- Enjoy all foods, but eat some in small amounts – these are the foods with a large proportion of fat or sugar such as fried foods, cream, biscuits, cakes and pastry. These foods contain higher amounts of unhealthy (saturated) fats, or are high in calories but poor in nutrients. It can help to think of these as **sometimes foods**, rather than everyday foods.
- Drink plenty of fluids for hydration and to prevent constipation, but limit highly **sweetened drinks** such as soft drinks, fruit juices and commercial iced teas, as they contain far more sugar. For example, one can (375 ml) of cola contains 10 teaspoons of sugar.
- If you drink alcohol, limit it to two standard drinks a day. Alcohol is a rich source of calories, with nearly twice as many calories as sugar, so be aware if you're watching your weight. For more information, see **Alcohol**.

Food labels carry useful information to help you make good choices about food.

Daily recommended food intake for women in midlife

If you eat regular meals containing carbohydrates, protein, vegetables or salad and you eat dairy foods each day, you are likely to be meeting your nutrient needs. The following foods are recommended each day:

- **meat and alternatives** – choose from lean meat, chicken, fish, eggs or vegetarian alternatives such as tofu, legumes (dried beans and lentils) nuts and seeds. Include them in one or two meals daily
- **dairy foods** – drink low-fat milk, eat yogurt or cheese. If using other milks such as almond, rice or soy milk, check you have chosen a brand with added calcium. Aim for three serves daily, where a serve equals a cup (250 millilitres) of milk or yogurt or a slice of cheese. These are good sources of protein and calcium
- **fruit and vegetables** – eat plenty of vegetables and fruit for vitamins and fibre. Their varying colours reflect different antioxidants and other nutrients that help maintain health, so include a variety of colourful fruit and vegetables. Five serves of vegetables and two of fruit are recommended each day
- **whole grains** – eat wholegrain breads and cereals for fuel, fibre and B-group vitamins. Less-processed foods such as whole grains tend to be richer in nutrients, beneficial for bowel regularity and more filling due to their fibre content
- **healthy fats** – eat heart-healthy oils in small amounts, including olive oil or seed oils such as canola, sunflower, safflower, peanut and soy. Limit saturated fats such as animal fat, butter, cream, palm and coconut oil.

Find out more from the **[Australian Dietary Guidelines](#)**.

If you follow a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle, **[plan your diet](#)** to be sure it includes all the essential nutrients.

Do you need vitamin or mineral supplements?

If you eat regular meals with adequate food variety, you are likely to be meeting your nutritional needs without needing to take nutritional supplements. There are some exceptions however:

- vitamin D is recommended if you have low levels of this vitamin.
- Calcium supplements are advised if you don't eat much dairy food.
- Vitamin B12 may be recommended if you are on medications that reduce stomach acid, such as Nexium. Talk to your GP if you take this sort of medication.
- Multivitamins can be beneficial if you do not eat a balanced diet, but generally are not necessary for those who eat regular, varied meals.

Iron supplements are unlikely to be needed by healthy women after menopause, as the need for iron to manufacture red blood cells decreases once periods cease. Most women can meet their iron needs with a varied diet.

Seek advice from a doctor if you are taking high doses of vitamins or minerals, as these can affect the absorption of other vitamins and minerals. Find out more about **[vitamin and mineral supplements](#)**.

Menopause and healthy eating

There is debate about the effects that certain foods may have on the symptoms of menopause such as hot flushes and mood changes.

Alcohol and caffeine may trigger hot flushes in some women, but a healthy diet, regular meals and regular exercise can help balance mood. The jury is out on whether the omega-3 fatty acids from oily fish can help improve mood and depression.

It is also unclear whether plant oestrogens (phytoestrogens) can replace some of the oestrogen lost at menopause and help reduce menopause symptoms.

For more information, see **[Menopause](#)** and **[Menopause and complementary therapies](#)**.

Healthy eating for common health conditions

Eating healthily can help with a range of common health conditions that women may experience in midlife.

Bone health

Your bones become less dense as you age, especially after menopause. This increases the risk of osteoporosis, a condition where the bones become fragile and easily broken.

As well as aging, many factors are involved in bone strength, including genetics, diet, exercise, vitamin D levels and smoking. You can't do anything about your genetics, but getting enough calcium, vitamin D and weight-bearing exercise can help maintain bone strength. For more information, see **[Osteoporosis](#)**.

Constipation

Bowel problems such as constipation become more common as you age. Increasing your intake of dietary fibre can help. For more information, see **[Fibre in food](#)**.

Irritable bowel syndrome

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a common condition that can cause varying symptoms. Research suggests that the nerves of the gut may become hypersensitive, resulting in pain or abnormal bowel contractions.

Often the cause is unclear, but IBS triggers can include certain foods and stress. IBS is more common in women than men, so there may be a hormonal component. IBS can also occur after a bout of gastroenteritis.

For more information, see **[Irritable bowel syndrome \(IBS\)](#)**.

Heart disease

Heart disease is the biggest killer of women, but many people are not aware of this. The drop in oestrogen that occurs at menopause increases the risk of heart disease, so this is the time to get your blood fats and blood pressure checked.

For more information, see [Heart](#) and [Cholesterol – healthy eating tips](#).

High blood pressure

Blood pressure tends to increase as you age and is a risk factor for stroke and heart disease.

Watching your weight, limiting alcohol intake to a maximum of one standard drink per day, getting at least 30 minutes exercise a day and limiting dietary **salt** will help keep your blood pressure in check. Potassium, found in fruit and vegetables, and calcium from low-fat dairy foods, may also help reduce blood pressure.

Type 2 diabetes and impaired glucose intolerance

Type 2 diabetes is a condition in which there is too much glucose in the blood. Glucose is a type of sugar that comes from the carbohydrates you eat, and is your body's main fuel source.

Diabetes happens when insulin, the hormone that controls the metabolism of glucose, is not being produced in sufficient amounts or the body's cells don't respond to it properly.

Risks factors for diabetes include genetic tendency, aging, being overweight, poor diet and inactivity.

In pre-diabetes, sometimes called impaired glucose intolerance or impaired fasting glucose, the blood glucose is higher than normal but not as high as in diabetes.

Weight management and body image for women in midlife

Many women experience weight gain and shape changes in midlife and these can affect **body image and self-esteem**.

Often fat is deposited on the abdomen and trunk, causing middle-aged spread. Whether these body changes are related more to ageing than to menopause is not clear. As you age, you have less muscle and your metabolic rate slows down, so you need fewer calories. At the same time, hormone changes can affect where fat is stored. For more information, see [Menopause and weight gain](#).

For adults over the age of 18, the healthy weight range is calculated by measuring their body mass index (BMI). If you would like to know what your BMI is and what it means, use our [Body mass index calculator](#).

While it may be tempting to go on a diet to lose weight, many popular **diets** make your body think it's being starved and so it responds by making you want to eat more, and ultimately you end up putting on weight.

Healthy weight management is about balancing the energy you take in through food, with the energy you burn. See [Balancing energy in and energy out](#) and [Weight loss – a healthy approach](#) for more information.

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