

Strategic Eating for the Menopause

Health is wealth so they say. Unfortunately one only realises how good it was when you have lost it. Unlike wealth – maintaining abundant rude health is neither hard work or stressful for the simple reason that we eat to live and can use each meal to strategically enhance and maintain our health status.

The ancient Chinese regarded the 'Four pillars of Health' as lifestyle, diet, exercise and the mind. Needless to say, diet has always been considered as the most important! Chinese Food Therapy is an integral part of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Depending on their nature and flavour, different foods have different effects on the body's metabolism and are used in Chinese Medicine Food Therapy to strengthen different organs.

The amazing news on the 14/09/2010 that a cereal bowl of watercress can slow tumour growth in breast cancer is an example of how you can easily use foods to enhance your health. The research was conducted on breast cancer survivors at the University of Southampton. These women were found to have high levels of a plant compound called PEITC in their blood samples 24 hours after eating eighty grams of watercress. Apparently this compound turns off the function of a protein (HIF – Hypoxia Inducible Factor) that is vital to tumour growth as it promotes the growth of blood vessels in normal tissue which in turn feeds the developing tumour with blood and oxygen. With this knowledge you can easily incorporate watercress into your diet as a preventative measure; another food that you should consider is Soya. It is a well documented fact that Asian communities have lower rates of breast cancer than their western sisters, they also suffer less intense menopausal symptoms, this has been put down to the fact that they regularly eat soya bean products like Tofu, soya flour, tempeh, miso etc. - you could go so far as to say that they eat these foods strategically...

In Traditional Chinese Medicine, the aging process is controlled by the Chinese kidneys; menopause is a natural part of this process. The intensity of symptoms associated with menopause can only occur if there is an underlying weakness. Menopausal women with following symptoms: hot flushes, hot hands and feet, night sweats, vaginal dryness, exhaustion, poor bladder control are advised to eat Tofu and soy food products such as fresh soy beans, soy flour, and soy protein. Soya is considered to have a Yin quality, which means that it has a moistening, and cooling effect when eaten regularly. Soya beans are high in proteins and amino acids and are therefore important in maintaining muscle and tissue integrity - as people diagnosed as being Yin deficient in Traditional Chinese Medicine frequently have poor muscle tone and can suffer weight loss.

Menopausal Symptoms

Osteoporosis - means porous bones and occurs when calcium is leached out of the bones. Bone is a living tissue made up of osteoclasts and osteoblasts. Osteoclasts break down existing bone and the level of their activity is controlled by estrogens. When estrogen levels fall they become increasingly more active which is why women lose 7-8 per cent of their total bone density in the 1st three years after menopause and continue to lose it but at a slower rate. Studies have shown that although

phytoestrogens such as soya help to reduce bone loss in menopausal women, they cannot compete with the powerful effects of HRT but having said that they do offer some of the positive effects of estrogen without the side effects of HRT. The kidneys in Chinese medicine are strongly related to bone formation

Bladder control and vaginal dryness: just as they are linked to the energetic functioning of the bladder and sex organs, tonifying the kidneys is the therapeutic recommendation if the functions of these organs are impaired and tofu is an excellent kidney tonic. In Western medicine terms vaginal dryness is due to a lack of estrogen to instigate the moistening of the cells again soya being a yin quality food would be recommended. Poor bladder control is a result of the muscles of the pelvic floor losing their tone as a result of declining estrogen levels; soya beans are high in vegetable proteins.

Hot Flashes: The kidneys in Chinese medicine provide the basis for both warming and cooling in the body; if this function is impaired the body has difficulty in regulating its temperature. Tofu has a cooling quality and being a Yin substance is described as having an “anchoring” quality on the Yang which has tendency to overheat the body. In Western medicine estrogen is a strong regulator of the body’s temperature.

Heart disease: this is the no. 1 killer of women over 45 years of age, this risk increases during menopause because of rising cholesterol levels and the deterioration of blood vessels which become thickened with plaque, a mixture of cholesterol, fats and cells. Plaque not only affects elasticity and flexibility of the blood vessels it also reduces the diameter of the vessels, therefore diminishing the amount of blood circulating in the blood vessels. In Chinese Medicine the ability of the blood vessels in being able to efficiently carry blood around the body is a ‘Chinese’ heart function, because of the close link between the Chinese ‘kidneys’ and the Chinese ‘heart’ functions eating soya tonifies the Chinese ‘kidneys’ and therefore supports the integrity of the Chinese ‘heart’ function. Soya protein lowers LDL cholesterol by 12.9 per cent acc to Dr James Anderson at univ/Kentucky who did a critical review of 38 scientific papers in the New England journal of medicine. To lower cholesterol the FDA states you need 25g of soy protein per day in conjunction with a diet that is low in sat fats and cholesterol.

Blood pressure: high blood pressure increases your risk of having a stroke – healthy middle aged women given a daily supplement of 20 g of soy protein split into 2 servings during the day showed a significant drop in the blood pressure acc to Dr Scott Washburn at wake forest univ school of med nth Carolina menopause 6:7-13 1999.

Estrogenic foods and breast cancer:

There is a lot of confusion regarding the safety of soya and tofu in the diets of menopausal women. As 2/3rds of breast cancers are estrogen dependent it is understandable that many menopausal women are afraid to take foods that would appear to boost their estrogen levels. Studies have shown that patients with breast cancer have relatively low levels of phytoestrogens in their diets. A study in Shanghai found that women with breast cancer had between 50 – 60 % lower levels of phytoestrogens in their urine than healthy Chinese women. In fact phytoestrogens like soya have been found to have a dual role in the body: on the one hand they boost

estrogen levels and on the other they block excess estrogens from attaching to receptors (alpha and beta) which can stimulate cancer cell growth. In 2004 the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition vol.79 concluded from the findings of a Dutch research study that a high intake of dietary phytoestrogens (isoflavones/ mammalian lignans) is not significantly related to breast cancer risk

Menopause is accompanied by a 70 per cent drop in estrogen levels in the body And although eating phytoestrogenic foods like soya when peri menopausal has an obvious and immediate benefit to women of a certain age, it is the hidden health factors of heart disease, high cholesterol levels associated with this drop in estrogen levels which makes having soya bean foods and a phytoestrogen rich diet so important. Adults who start a diet that include 25 grams of soy foods daily will experience some benefit from the isoflavones but will not gain the same protection from cancer as people who have eaten soy regularly over a lifetime.

How to benefit from Pytoestrogens:

Isoflavones, soya is the richest source of these, Lignans, linseeds are a good supply of these and Coumestans are found in alfalfa sprouts. However to effectively absorb these you need to keep your intestinal bacteria healthy with probiotics such as lactobacillus and bifidus. Equol is an important metabolite associated with soya protein, a higher carbohydrate and lower saturated fat diet increases the chance of you being an equol prodcer.

It is more beneficial to maintain a high and constant blood level of phytoestrogens, so it is advisable to eat a mix of phytoestrogenic foods during the day rather than at one meal.

Soy Supplements

You really cannot overdose on food based phtoestrogens (isoflavones) as they are about one hundredth as powerful as natural female estrogens also the body disposes of unwanted isoflavones through urination. However supplements that contain high levels of isolated soy isoflavones should be avoided – there have not been enough studies as to whether concentrations of these isoflavones may trigger breast cancer.

When to avoid soy

It is unadvisable to take Soya if you are taking a SERM (Selective estrogen receptor modulator) like tamoxifen or an aromatase inhibitor such as aromasin. Research findings have found that the soy isoflavone Genistein may counteract estrogen suppressors and make post cancer treatment medication less effective. Also it is unadvisable to take if you have Goitre or some Thyroid Issues.

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The Chinese have been using food strategically for centuries - out of the 'Four pillars of Health', (that is lifestyle, diet, exercise and the mind,) diet has always been considered as the most important. Chinese Food Therapy is an integral part of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Depending on their nature and flavour, different foods have different effects on the body's metabolism and are used to strengthen different organs, for example watercress is used to treat coughs as it strengthens the Lung.

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