



# THE PLAIN DEALER

## Change of lifestyle eases effects of change of life

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All my life my blood pressure has been in range, my cholesterol numbers good and my weight stable - all without much effort on my part. Now that I'm over 50, I feel like I'm falling apart. My doctor nags me about my blood pressure, my weight's creeping up, and my last lipid profile was bad news. Could this have anything to do with the fact that I'm going through menopause? Is there anything I can do?

I'm reminded of that old joke: Getting old is terrible, except when you compare it to the alternative. Men have a higher rate of cardiovascular disease than women - until women reach menopause. Then we become more like men. We start throwing our clothes on the floor and refuse to ask for directions. (Just kidding.)

Before menopause, women have lower LDL-cholesterol (the bad kind) and higher HDL-cholesterol (the good kind). After menopause, the total cholesterol, LDL and triglycerides increase, on average, about 4 percent.

Many women also gain weight during the perimenopausal period, an average of about 5 pounds. Part of this gain is probably due to lifestyle and decline in metabolism that accompanies aging.

There is some evidence that hormonal changes might affect the rate and pattern of weight gain. Before menopause, estrogen encourages the deposit of fat in the hips and buttocks, the so-called "pear" distribution common to women. In post-menopausal women, abdominal fat increases, producing the "apple" shape that is associated with increased risk of heart disease, diabetes, hypertension and other chronic diseases. Bone loss also accelerates, increasing the risk of osteoporosis.

So what can you do? That depends on your current habits and lifestyle.

A good diet and health history is part of any nutrition-therapy session.

When clients tell me they eat large servings of fatty meats, whole milk dairy products, fried foods and desserts, when they confess that they sit in front of the television or computer all day, when the only vegetable they ever encounter is french fries, I reply, "Good news! There's a lot you can change if you're willing."

It's the semivegetarian marathon runners with high lipids who will need medication.

Healthy habits

for change of life

With your health provider's approval . . .

1. Become more physically active.

Weight-bearing exercise such as walking protects your bones, improves your mood and burns calories. It even might reduce hot flashes.

Toning exercises build muscle mass and fight the decline in metabolic rate seen with aging.

The 2005 U.S. Dietary Guidelines recommend 60 minutes of moderate- to vigorous-intensity activity on most days of the week to prevent gradual weight gain in adulthood.

## 2. Reduce dietary fat.

Especially reduce saturated fat in your diet. Because fat is the most calorie-dense of the nutrients, cutting fat cuts calories. And reducing saturated fat is the most effective dietary strategy to lower LDL and total cholesterol. (See the accompanying Web sites for further information on therapeutic lifestyle changes.)

## 3. Improve your overall diet.

Include more whole grains, fruits and vegetables. These foods are packed with nutrients but have a low calorie-density.

## 4. Consider including more soy foods.

Soy can reduce blood cholesterol and promote heart health. Although the research is mixed, there is evidence that soy also can reduce menopausal symptoms such as hot flashes. Experts recommend two servings of soy foods a day, including soy milk, tofu, soybeans, tempeh and miso.

## 5. Remember calcium and vitamin D.

Include good sources of both, such as low-fat dairy products, in your meals and snacks.

Low-fat dairy promotes bone health and also might lower blood pressure and help with weight loss. Most women of menopausal age do not get sufficient calcium through diet.

You might want to consider taking a calcium and vitamin D supplement.

Cinda Williams Chima is a registered dietitian on the faculty of the University of Akron. Her column runs every other week. E-mail nutrition and weight-control questions, labeled "Nutri-News," to [food@plaind.com](mailto:food@plaind.com).

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