

Oily fish, legumes in diet can delay menopause

Philippine Daily Inquirer · 15 May 2018 · C1 · RAFAEL CASTILLO, M.D.

Menopause in women usually ushers in a bothersome list of symptoms, such as hot flashes, chills, night sweats, sleep problems, osteoporosis, irritability, depression and mood changes, weight gain and slowed metabolism and sexual dysfunction.



Cardiovascular disease and the risk of heart attack and stroke also increase dramatically a few years after menopause, because of the loss of cardiovascular protection provided by the female reproductive hormones.

Bad cholesterol (low density lipoprotein) and triglycerides (fats in the blood that are harmful, if elevated) also tend to increase after menopause.

Hence, after menopause, almost 50 percent of deaths in women are due to cardiovascular disease.

The adverse effects of menopause are true even for those who have undergone early or surgical menopause, i.e., those whose ovaries and reproductive organs have been taken out due to a tumor or other medical problems.

Therefore, scientists and doctors have been trying to find out how women could delay their menopause and maintain a reasonable level of their reproductive hormones—estrogen and progesterone—short of giving them drugs.

A recently published study indicates that eating oily fish and fresh legumes delays the onset of natural menopause by around three years.

The United Kingdom Women's Cohort Study (UKWCS), published in the April 30 issue of the Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health, also showed that a higher intake of vitamin B6 and zinc was associated with modestly delayed menopause.

Consuming refined pasta and white rice, meanwhile, seemed linked to earlier onset of menopause by 1.5 years. Purely vegetarian or vegan women had an earlier natural menopause than nonvegetarians.

Diet effect

Dr. Yashvee Dunneram from the University of Leeds, UK, the study's lead author, said that their findings confirm that diet may have a significant effect on the onset of natural menopause.

“Health practitioners might also need to take into account the diet of women when dealing with menopause-related issues,” said Dr. Dunneram.

The researchers investigated the effects on menopause of 217 food eaten daily. The participants consisted of 38-percent vegetarians, and the majority were married with two or more pregnancies, and were professionals.

Eight percent of the women smoked, and most also consumed around one drink or one unit of alcohol per day. Median age at menopause was 51.

The researchers made statistical adjustments to discount the effects of other dietary factors, other than the ones being analyzed. After adjustments, a high intake of oily fish was associated with the delayed onset of natural menopause by 3.3 years per portion or serving per day. The higher the consumption, the longer the delay of menopause was.

Fresh legumes such as peas, beans, lentils delayed menopause by 0.9 years/portion/day.

Those with a higher intake of vitamin B6 also had delayed menopause at 0.6 years/mg/day, while those taking zinc supplements had a delay of 0.3 years/mg/day.

The opposite effect was noted with refined pasta and rice, which were associated with an earlier menopause of -1.5 years/portion/day.

The authors explained that oily fish and legumes can neutralize the adverse effects of harmful processes in the body caused by reactive oxygen species. They can also decrease breakdown in the ovaries of the eggs and follicles (follicular atresia), delaying the onset of natural menopause. When the follicles and the eggs die, the ovaries stop producing the hormones estrogen and progesterone. These two hormones regulate the menstrual cycle.

Early menopause

There are women who have menopause very early, before the age of 40, due to premature ovarian failure (POF). Young women with a family history of POF should start eating more oily deep-sea fish and legumes early.

The likely reason for the earlier menopause in women fond of refined carbohydrates involves the metabolic effects of these food, which increase insulin resistance. The resistance may cause derangement in the female hormones that may cause more ovulation cycles and rapid depletion of oocytes or eggs, leading to earlier menopause.

This is the first study that thoroughly looked at the impact of diet—specifically, the links between individual nutrients and a wide variety of food groups—on the age at natural menopause in a large cohort of women. Although this was done among British women, there’s good reason to believe it could also be applicable to women in general.

May Measurement Month

We launched the monthlong May Measurement Month (MMM2018) nationwide to increase awareness on hypertension and to diagnose those who might not realize that they’re hypertensive and require treatment to prevent heart attack, stroke and other potentially deadly complications.

This is a global campaign in more than 100 countries, the Philippine being one of the country leaders.

Last year the Philippines contributed 272,000 screened individuals or 22 percent of the total screened pool of 1.2 million from more than 100 countries.

We're calling on all doctors, nurses, midwives and civic-spirited individuals to join this campaign to help save some of the more than 100,000 Filipinos who die yearly due to hypertension-related complications. Visit www.maymeasure.com, or call the Philippine Society of Hypertension at 6962819. The life you save may be that of a loved one, or may be your own.