

My Sisters' Cookbook

Food and Menopause

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Jelena Pop-Kostic

A photograph of a hand pouring olive oil from a glass bottle onto a dish of vegetables. The scene is set on a light-colored surface with various ingredients and dishes in the background, including a bowl of walnuts, a bowl of red peppers, a jar of pickles, and a small bowl of almonds. The lighting is warm and focused on the pouring action.

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Jelena Pop-Kostic and Dr Boban Simonovic

Photographs by Jelena Pop-Kostic

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My Sisters' Cookbook

This book is dedicated to my sisters.

My sisters and I have never been together in the same place. We live in different countries and have various professions and lifestyles. Some of us are parents, single parents, or without children, and others are single or have partners. Despite being so many, we all call each other sisters. However, my parents only have two daughters and no other children. In Serbian culture and most of the Balkans, you consider your aunt and uncle's daughters as sisters in addition to your siblings. This network of sisters goes even further, as my mother's sister has her own daughters who, are also among my sisters. Thus, the concept of sisterhood extends widely and deeply in our culture.

One summer afternoon, my sister Mirjana and I (my father and her mother are siblings) were catching up on life stories in my parent's garden. We don't get to meet in person very often because we live in different countries. It was during this conversation that we came up with the idea for a cookbook. As women in various stages of menopause who love to eat, we wanted to continue eating well while being mindful of the changes in our diet that were necessary. Making changes in life requires reliable and accurate information. That's why we created the cookbook with recipes that combine our love for food, my creativity in combining ingredients and flavours, my knowledge and obsessive curiosity about different cuisines and foods, and my scientific background as a biochemist. I hold a master's degree in biochemistry, and I have also studied nutrition. I vividly recall my favourite professor from university sharing an anecdote from his life when he was invited to his friend's house for a meal. He looked at the table and exclaimed, "There are no vitamins and minerals here, just energy!"

Based on the energy content, or calorie count, I have organized the recipes into three categories of highly nutritious meals:

Chapter 1: High-energy meals

Chapter 2: Low-energy meals

Chapter 3: Breakfast and Snacks

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To plan three meals for a daily menu, combine dishes from each group throughout the day. As my favourite professor used to say, aim to incorporate a variety of colours, and avoid consuming too many 'white' foods.

Why is this cookbook different than any other healthy food cookbook?

What sets this cookbook apart from other healthy food cookbooks is its focus on ingredients that are essential for women in perimenopause, menopause, or post-menopause. However, the recipes are not exclusively for women but are also suitable for those who need to feed others in their daily lives. The cookbook includes guidance on adjusting recipes by adding a few additional steps to make them suitable for a wider audience. The cookbook does not recommend a complete lifestyle change or strict adherence to new rules. Instead, it provides guidance on making necessary changes to the diet based on scientific research.

We are a family of foodies, consisting of my husband, our young adult, and our teenage son. We all enjoy cooking and eating delicious food. By chance, my husband and I have allocated different types of dishes we cook based on our interests and enjoyment in the process. Cooking together is one of our favourite things to do, and my husband always plays music in the background, which adds to the enjoyable atmosphere. Our creativity when cooking, combined with music, creates a relaxing and enjoyable experience. These moments trigger memories and conversations that take us to various places in our past and future. However, there is one habit that we have adapted to while cooking, and that is to clean as we go. We put away any ingredients, dirty dishes, empty packaging, or anything else we no longer need. These small steps prevent a big mess from accumulating, and the surrounding environment remains organized and harmonious. You won't feel like it's a chore, and you'll thank us later.

We need energy from food to make our bodies function, to process the food we consume, and to engage in physical activities. Additionally, we require extra energy to fight physical trauma or stress. However, we must be smart about what we eat. During prolonged periods of stress, unless we use food as a comfort, we might lose some weight, but I would never recommend this method. In the life cycle, we experience hormonal imbalances twice: once during puberty, followed by a long period with less hormonal fluctuation until menopause, when they become imbalanced again. Correcting your diet is the simplest way to ease up some of our pain. Of course, this will not fix everything.

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Green Beans with Sweet Potato Stew

The science behind the recipes

Phytoestrogens

Phytoestrogens are substances found in legumes (such as chickpeas, lentils, dried beans, mung beans, and peas), particularly soybeans, tofu, tempeh, soy milk, and some fruits (like apples, pomegranates, berries, and chaste berries), vegetables (including garlic, celery, carrots, potatoes, and sweet potatoes), cereals (such as wheat, wheat germ, and oats), rice, nuts, sesame seeds, alfalfa, and coffee (Desmawati et al., 2019; Saljoughian, 2007). The structure of phytoestrogens is similar to oestrogen, the primary female sex hormone. As such, they can mimic the hormone, and phytoestrogens are used in many pharmaceutical supplements to help deal with some of the symptoms of menopause, such as hot flushes, vaginal dryness, and osteoporosis.

However, it is important to note that in this book, we only focus on the intake of nutrients (including phytoestrogens) through food, not supplements (Rietjens et al., 2017). The use of supplements is beyond my expertise.

During menopause, hormonal changes occur, including lower production of oestrogen and progesterone and higher production of FSH (Follicle-stimulating hormone). As a consequence of these hormonal changes, women may experience various symptoms, such as hot flashes, night sweats, and vaginal dryness, as well as long-term conditions such as osteoporosis and cardiovascular diseases (Domínguez-López et al., 2020). Furthermore, Domínguez-López (2020) suggests that there is not enough evidence to support the idea that phytoestrogens affect the levels of sex hormones. Phytoestrogens do not increase the production of oestrogen; rather, they act as lookalikes, mimicking hormones and performing their functions.

Research shows that combining phytoestrogens with vitamin D may be effective in reducing bone loss after menopause, but this may require long-term consumption of at least six months. Adding soy and other phytoestrogen-rich foods to an already healthy diet can help maintain healthy bones (Desmawati et al., 2019).

In this cookbook, many recipes are designed around ingredients rich in phytoestrogens.

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Influences on digestion

Putting love and effort into your meals and creating visually pleasing and tasty food with delightful smells can have a positive effect on your digestion. It increases the production of saliva and the movements of the intestine. However, stress can work in the opposite direction. Later, we will discuss stress management. It's important to note that certain factors might slow down digestion, such as deep-fried or cold food (Insel et al., 2007).

Fiber, Carbohydrates, and Digestion

Fibers are carbohydrates that our bodies cannot digest, such as pectin or cellulose. Even though we don't use them as body fuel, fibres play a significant role. Diets rich in fibres help maintain weight by creating a feeling of fullness for a longer time compared to food with lower fibre content. They also affect glucose levels in the blood and reduce the risk of heart disease (Insel et al., 2007).

A study performed on postmenopausal women shows that a low-fibre diet might worsen or increase the symptoms of depression. The exact mechanism has not been confirmed, even though some indications point out that a fibre-rich diet significantly improves gut microflora (all the beneficial microorganisms in the digestive system) responsible, among other things, for producing short-chain fatty acids, which are beneficial for our health (Ramin et al., 2020).

How to Increase Fiber in Your Diet?

Fruits and vegetables are rich in fibre, but it is important to consume whole fruit instead of fruit juice, as the peel has a high concentration of pectin. Fruits rich in fibre include berries, bananas, apples, pears, grapefruit, mangoes, and oranges. Vegetables such as broccoli, Brussels sprouts, carrots, red cabbage, and green peppers are also good sources of fibre. Legumes, brown rice, oats, nuts, and seeds are also fibre-rich. However, to avoid any issues caused by a sudden increase in fibre intake, it is important to increase your water intake as well (Insel et al., 2007).

The Psychological Impact of a Balanced Diet on Women's Health During Menopause

Introduction

Welcome to a culinary journey designed to support women as they navigate the intricate phases of perimenopause, menopause, and post-menopause. These stages of life often accompany a myriad of physical and psychological challenges, including hormonal fluctuations that can profoundly affect mood and cognitive function. However, within these challenges lies an opportunity for empowerment through nutrition. By embracing a balanced diet tailored to the unique needs of this stage, women can not only mitigate the impact of hormonal changes but also foster mental well-being, happiness, and overall vitality.

The hormonal shifts experienced during menopause can disrupt sleep patterns and exacerbate mood swings, creating a ripple effect on mental health (Bromberger et al., 2011). Moreover, external factors such as stress and lifestyle adjustments further compound these challenges, highlighting the need for comprehensive dietary support (Santoro et al., 2016). In this cookbook, we embark on a culinary exploration that goes beyond mere sustenance. We explore the profound psychological impact of incorporating nutrient-rich foods into daily meals, offering a holistic approach to nurturing cognitive function, mood regulation, and mental health.

Throughout these pages, you'll discover recipes meticulously designed to provide not only sustenance for the body but also nourishment for the mind and soul. Each dish is thoughtfully designed to leverage the therapeutic potential of whole foods, harnessing their inherent nutrients to support women through every phase of menopause. As you embark on this culinary adventure, may you find not only delicious flavours but also a renewed sense of vitality and well-being. Let's embark on this journey together, where the kitchen becomes a sanctuary of healing and empowerment.

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Mood Regulation and Emotional Well-being

The connection between diet and mental health is profound and well-established. Dietary patterns abundant in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, and healthy fats have consistently shown to reduce the risk of depression, anxiety, and cognitive decline (Jacka et al., 2017; Opie et al., 2017). Conversely, diets rich in processed foods, sugars, and unhealthy fats have been associated with an increased incidence of mental health disorders (Molendijk et al., 2018). For women navigating menopause, focusing on nutrient-dense foods becomes paramount, offering a pathway to support psychological well-being and elevate overall quality of life.

During menopause, one of the most significant psychological challenges is mood instability, manifesting as symptoms of depression, anxiety, and irritability. Dietary factors emerge as crucial players in mood regulation, with specific nutrients and dietary patterns influencing neurotransmitter activity and emotional resilience (Jacka et al., 2017). Omega-3 fatty acids, abundant in fatty fish, flaxseeds, and walnuts, have been associated with diminished symptoms of depression and anxiety (Grosso et al., 2014). Similarly, the consumption of fruits and vegetables, brimming with antioxidants and vitamins, has been linked to improved mood and emotional well-being (Lassale et al., 2019). Prioritizing these brain-boosting foods in the diet empowers women to better navigate mood swings and bolster their overall emotional resilience during the menopausal transition.

The hormonal fluctuations inherent in menopause also give rise to heightened emotional sensitivity. Adopting a balanced diet can serve as a powerful tool to regulate mood and enhance emotional resilience. Foods rich in tryptophan, such as turkey, eggs, and tofu, facilitate the production of serotonin, a neurotransmitter associated with feelings of happiness and well-being (Fernstrom, 2012). Moreover, complex carbohydrates found in whole grains and legumes support stable blood sugar levels, mitigating mood fluctuations and fostering a sense of calm (Gibson-Smith et al., 2018). By emphasizing these mood-boosting foods, women can effectively manage the emotional highs and lows associated with menopause.

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How to Prepare your Vegetables

Carrots:

Peel or scrape, then wash under the tap. Only peel carrots if they are not particularly fresh and the surface is dry. They are still fine to use, but they need more than scraping; that's all you need to do with fresh carrots. It's a shame to waste any of their goodness by peeling.

Onions:

Remove the dry outer layers and wash the onions before you chop or slice them. Cut them in half and remove the white part under the stem.

Butternut Squash:

You will need a large cutting board and a sharp knife. Firmly hold the bulb-shaped part of the squash and start cutting disks, around 1cm thick, starting from the top end but discarding the stem. After cutting all the disks of the cylinder-shaped bit, cut them in halves and arrange them on the lined baking tray. Flip off the bulb-shaped leftover piece so it stands up on the cut section and cut it in half. Scoop out the seeds and cut the slices in the same thickness as before, discarding the stem. Depending on the size of the butternut squash, you might need two baking trays. Roast in a preheated oven at 180°C, with the fan on, for 50 minutes.

Celeriac:

Cut off the top and bottom so it stands up on the chopping board. Continuing with the sharp knife, cut off the skin in strips starting from the top. Wash it thoroughly before further cooking.

Fennel:

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Wash the fennel, remove any discoloured parts, and cut lengthwise. Cut out the hard root at the bottom of the sliced bulb. On the stalk side, cut the ends of the stalks. Now, cut the halves lengthwise into quarters and thinly slice every quarter of the bulb.

Bok Choy:

Start by peeling the leaves from the outside to remove any dirt between the leaves. Onto the chopping board, cut off the root end, cut the bulb and leaves lengthwise, and slice them into half-moons.

Cauliflower:

Remove the outer leaves. Hold the stem with one hand and, with the dominant hand, cut out the florets around the stem. Discard the stem. Break the florets into smaller bits if needed.

Leek:

Cut the tops of both ends and then in the middle, separating whites and greens. Slice each half sidelong and wash under running water, making sure to wash any residual dirt between the layers. Along the long side, make cuts no more than 1cm apart. With one hand, hold the strips and dice them every 1cm or so.



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