
Unlock your hormonal harmony

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My background

- General medicine physician, Norwood
 - metabolic health, lifestyle medicine, women's hormonal health and neuroimmune fatigue syndromes.
- Obsessed permaculturist/gardener and plant-based home cook and nutrition enthusiast





Disclosures and Biases

Disclosures: None.

Biases: Gardening, carbs, and shiraz.

Outline

- **Perimenopause / Menopause**
- **MHT / HRT**
- **Lifestyle factors in /Perimenopause/Menopause**
- **Nutrition in Perimenopause/Menopause**
- **Alcohol in menopause**

A word on estrogen...

Effects (Benefits) of Estrogen =

- Brain - dopamine, serotonin, GABA, acetylcholine, glutamate
- HPA axis
- Cardiovascular system
- Bone
- Muscle and connective tissue
- Skin and hair
- Urogenital tract
- Metabolic health
- Immune and inflammatory modulation





Perimenopause

- Transitional phase leading up to menopause and extending for 12 months after the final menstrual period
- Progressive decline in ovarian follicular function
- Fluctuating hormone levels - often surges of estrogen and declining progesterone
- Symptoms – Irregular cycles, heavier bleeding, mood, cognitive, sleep disturbances
- May precede complete menopause by several years

Menopause



- 12 months since last period
- The end of ovarian follicular activity and a hypoestrogenic state.
- Clinical signs - Amenorrhoea for at least 12 months, Persistently elevated FSH, low estradiol (testing rarely required)
- Symptoms - Vasomotor instability (hot flushes, night sweats), Sleep and cognitive changes, Mood fluctuations, Urogenital atrophy, sexual dysfunction, joint stiffness, Long-term - metabolic and bone health changes
- Timing - Average age in Australia ~51 years (range 45–55)

STRAW +10 Staging System

Menarche					FMP (0)					
Stage	-5	-4	-3b	-3a	-2	-1	+1 a	+1b	+1c	+2
Terminology	REPRODUCTIVE				MENOPAUSAL TRANSITION		POSTMENOPAUSE			
	Early	Peak	Late		Early	Late	Early			Late
					Perimenopause					
Duration	variable				variable	1-3 years	2 years (1+1)	3-6 years	Remaining lifespan	
PRINCIPAL CRITERIA										
Menstrual Cycle	Variable to regular	Regular	Regular	Subtle changes in Flow/ Length	Variable Length Persistent ≥7- day difference in length of consecutive cycles	Interval of amenorrhea of ≥=60 days				
SUPPORTIVE CRITERIA										
Endocrine FSH AMH Inhibin B			Low Low	Variable* Low Low	↑ Variable* Low Low	↑ >25 IU/L** Low Low	↑ Variable Low Low	Stabilizes Very Low Very Low		
Antral Follicle Count			Low	Low	Low	Low	Very Low	Very Low		
DESCRIPTIVE CHARACTERISTICS										
Symptoms						Vasomotor symptoms Likely	Vasomotor symptoms Most Likely		Increasing symptoms of urogenital atrophy	
* Blood draw on cycle days 2-5 ↑ = elevated										
**Approximate expected level based on assays using current international pituitary standard ⁶⁷⁻⁶⁹										

Reference:

Harlow SD, Gass M, Hall JE, Lobo R, Maki P, Rebar RW, Sherman S, Sluss PM, de Villiers TJ; STRAW +10 Collaborative Group.

Executive summary of the Stages of Reproductive Aging Workshop +10: addressing the unfinished agenda of staging reproductive aging.

Menopause. 2012;19(4):387–395. doi:10.1097/gme.0b013e31824d8f40



But wait...
It's not just hormones

Other challenges at mid-life



Women at mid-life, more than a lack of estrogen

- **Career demands**
- **Financial Pressure** – managing retirement planning, supporting kids/parents
- **Parenting Stress**
- **Elder Care Responsibilities Marital Strain or Divorce**
- **Body image pressures** – weight gain / fat redistribution, skin and hair changes
- **Health issues**

(Yes men have issues too!! That's for another talk another day...)

A short word on MHT (Menopausal hormonal therapy)...

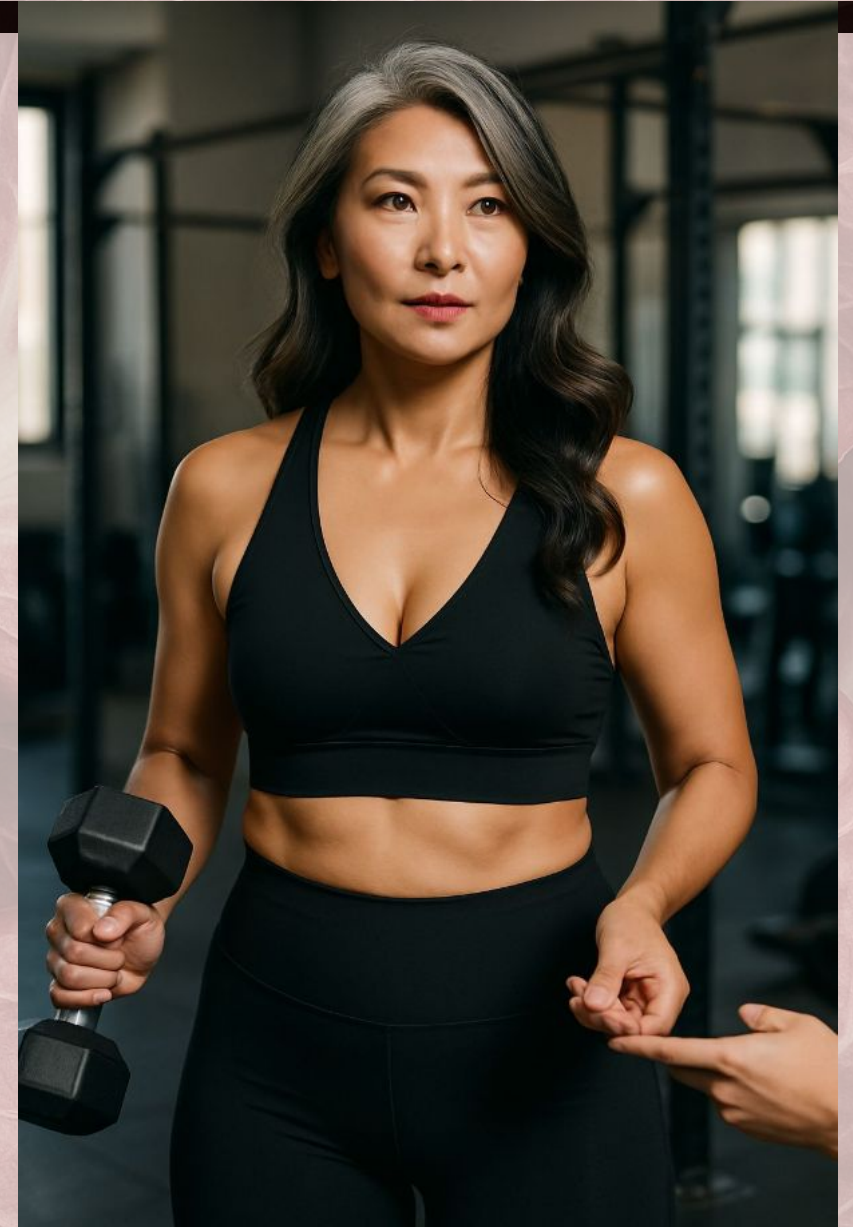
- Estrogen – relief of most menopausal symptoms, plus bone strengthening, vascular and brain health, urogenital health
- Progesterone (or progestin) (necessary if uterus present) – uterine protection, micronized progesterone can have a calming effect
- +/- Testosterone (Androfemme)- for hypoactive sex drive, plus possible benefits on cognition, energy
- Greatest benefit if started within 10 years of last period
- MHT can be started in perimenopause – stabilise fluctuating estrogen and supplement declining progesterone -consider contraceptive needs

MHT - Safety

- Evidence shift - WHI data re-evaluated: risks small, largely age-dependent, and not applicable to modern regimens
- **Early initiation** may reduce all-cause and cardiovascular mortality
- Safe for most women within 10 years of menopause onset or under age 60
- **Transdermal oestrogen** (estrogel, sandrena, patches) preferred for lowest stroke and clotting risk
- **Micronised progesterone** (prometrium) more favourable side effect profile than progestins
- Vaginal oestrogen safe at any age and duration for urogenital symptoms
- Therapy must be individualised — no “one-size-fits-all” duration limit

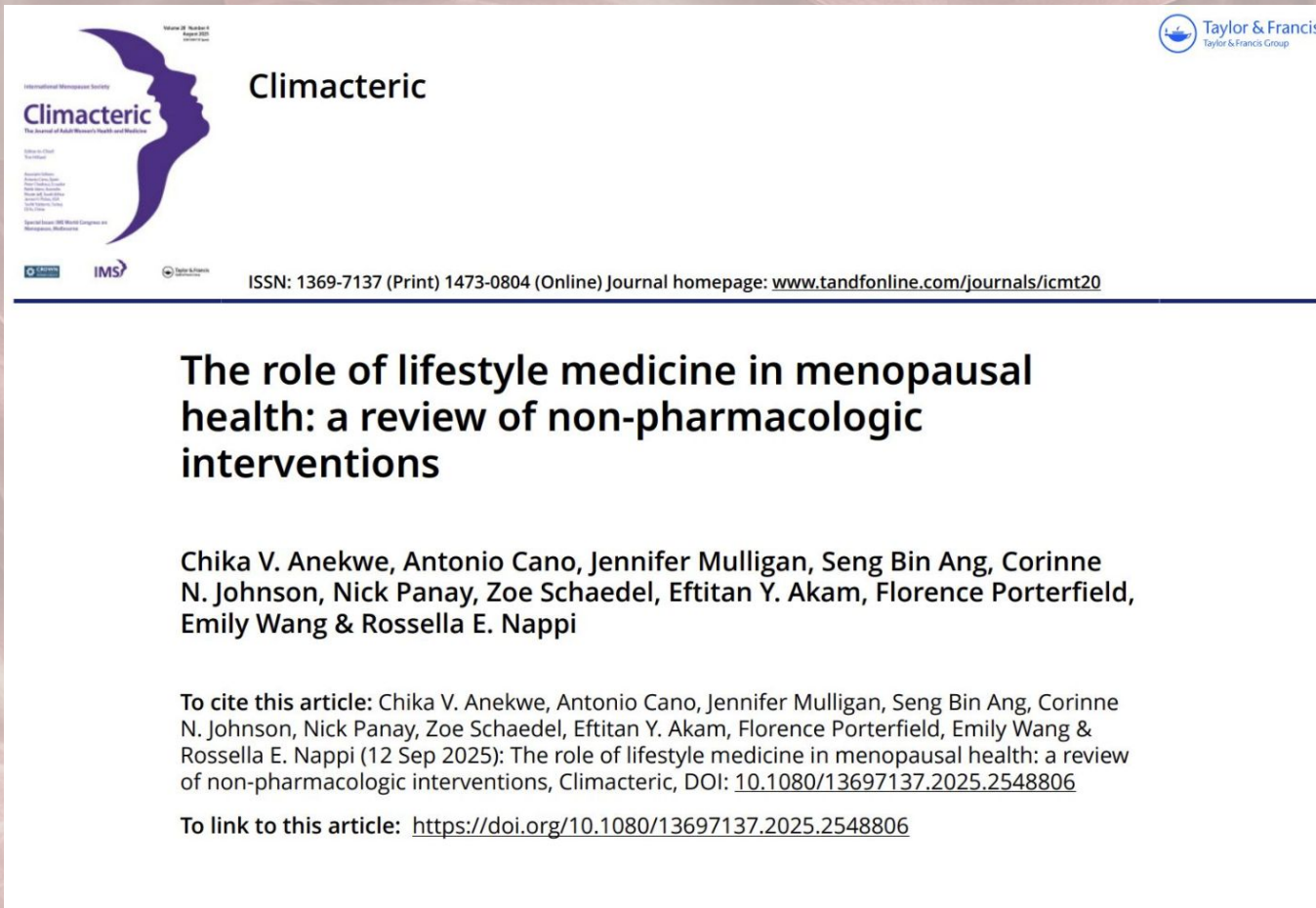
Lifestyle and Menopause – The evidence

- Symptoms of menopause are less severe in women who adhere to positive lifestyle behaviours – particularly increased physical exercise, not smoking, drinking less alcohol and having a lower BMI.
- Interventional studies tend to show limited evidence of benefit.
- Unfortunately most studies focus menopausal symptoms rather than longer term outcomes.



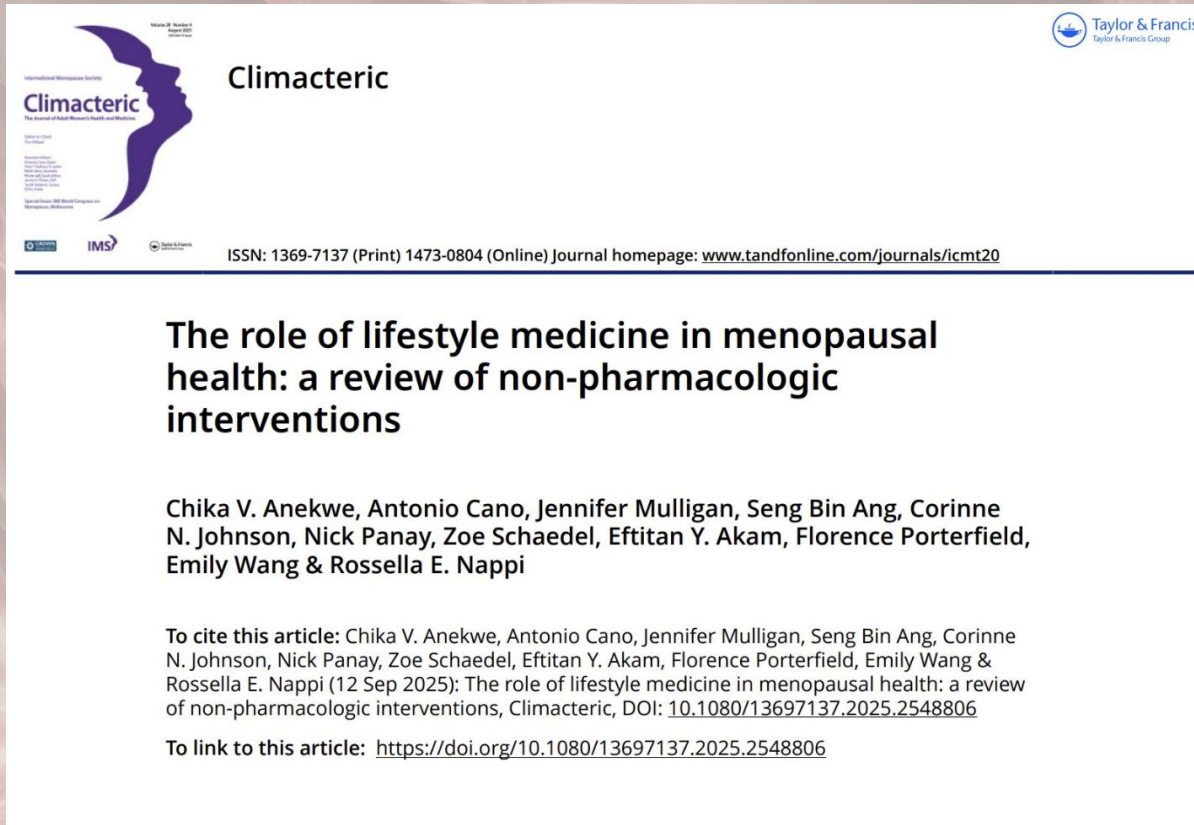
To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13697137.2025.2548806>

Method-



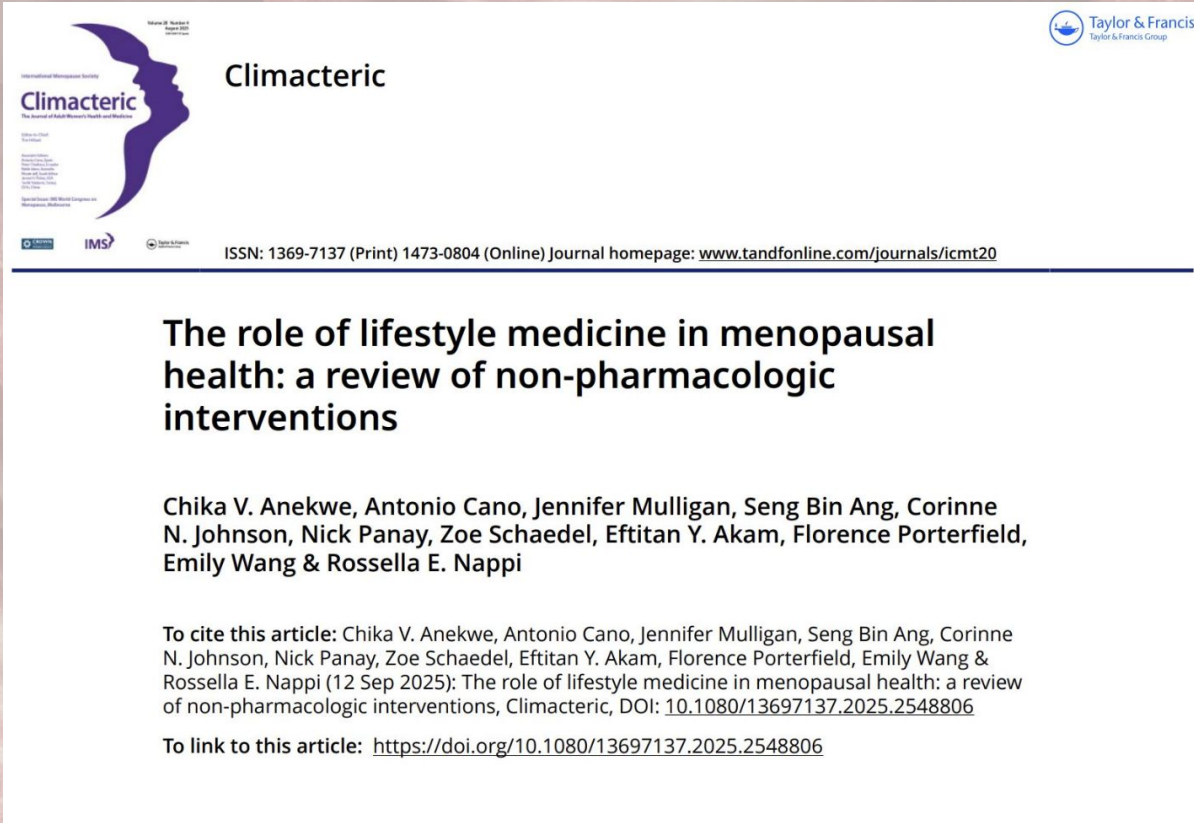
- 54 studies (≈ 24 RCTs + 30 observational) | > 12 000 participants aged 40–65.
- Inclusion → ≥ 1 pillar of lifestyle medicine (nutrition, physical activity, sleep, weight, avoidance of risky substances).
- Outcomes → vasomotor symptoms, sleep quality, mood, metabolic markers, bone health.
- Quality appraisal using GRADE criteria → overall *moderate* certainty.

Main Findings



- **Vasomotor Symptoms:** ↓ frequency & severity in > 70 % of weight-loss & exercise interventions (≥ 5 % body-weight loss or regular aerobic + resistance training).
- **Sleep:** Improved Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index by ≈ 2 points across 9 RCTs.
- **Mood / Well-being:** Reduced depressive symptoms and better HADS/CES-D scores in > 60 % of studies.
- **Metabolic Health:** Average 3–6 kg weight loss + improved HOMA-IR and lipid profiles.
- **Bone / CV Health:** Synergistic benefit from Mediterranean-style diet + resistance training.

Clinical takeaways -



The image shows the front cover of the journal 'Climacteric'. At the top left is the journal's logo, which includes a stylized purple silhouette of a woman's head and shoulders. To the right of the logo is the journal title 'Climacteric' in a bold, black, sans-serif font. Below the title, there is a list of the journal's content areas: 'Menopausal Hormones', 'Vasomotor Symptoms', 'Mental Health', 'Bone Health', 'Metabolic Health', 'Sexual Health', 'Quality of Life', and 'Research'. At the top right of the cover is the Taylor & Francis logo. Below the journal title and content areas, there is a line of text providing the ISSN (1369-7137 for print, 1473-0804 for online) and the journal's homepage URL (www.tandfonline.com/journals/icmt20). The main title of the article, 'The role of lifestyle medicine in menopausal health: a review of non-pharmacologic interventions', is prominently displayed in a bold, black, sans-serif font. Below the title, the authors' names are listed: Chika V. Anekwe, Antonio Cano, Jennifer Mulligan, Seng Bin Ang, Corinne N. Johnson, Nick Panay, Zoe Schaedel, Eftitan Y. Akam, Florence Porterfield, Emily Wang & Rossella E. Nappi. At the bottom of the cover, there is a section for citing the article, which includes the full citation text and the DOI (10.1080/13697137.2025.2548806). Finally, at the very bottom, there is a link to the article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13697137.2025.2548806.

Climacteric
The Journal of Menopausal Health and Research

ISSN: 1369-7137 (Print) 1473-0804 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/icmt20

The role of lifestyle medicine in menopausal health: a review of non-pharmacologic interventions

Chika V. Anekwe, Antonio Cano, Jennifer Mulligan, Seng Bin Ang, Corinne N. Johnson, Nick Panay, Zoe Schaedel, Eftitan Y. Akam, Florence Porterfield, Emily Wang & Rossella E. Nappi

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- **Lifestyle medicine** = evidence-based first-line support for menopausal women.
- Addresses multiple domains (vasomotor, sleep, mental, metabolic, bone).
- Especially useful when MHT is contraindicated or declined.
- Integrates with MHT for synergistic benefit on quality of life and long-term health.
- Reinforces the role of multidisciplinary care (physicians, dietitians, exercise physiologists, psychologists).

Exercise in Menopause

- Structured physical activity (exercise) is associated with improved health outcomes in menopause.'
- “mind-body” exercises (yoga, tai chi, Pilates, qigong) in perimenopausal/postmenopausal women – improves bone density, sleep quality, anxiety, depression, fatigue
- Strength (resistance) training in menopause
 - improvements in pelvic floor strength, lean mass, bone density





Exercise in Menopause – practical prescription

- Aim for **≥ 150 minutes/week** of moderate aerobic activity (or 75 minutes vigorous)
- At least **2–3 sessions/week** of resistance (strength) training: moderate-to-high intensity, targeting major muscle groups
- Include **impact/weight-bearing** activities for bone health (e.g., jumping, hopping, impact walks) when safe.
- Mind-body exercise (yoga/tai chi) 1–3 times/week can augment sleep, mood, fatigue and bone outcomes.

Nutrition for hormonal harmony

- Polyphenols
 - Phytoestrogens
- Microbiome and estrobolome
- Nutrition for insulin resistance
- Bone Health



Polyphenols

- Found in plant foods - give fruits, vegetables, tea, coffee, herbs, cocoa, and wine their colour and flavour.
 - Protect plants from UV damage, pests, and oxidative stress
 - In humans they act as antioxidants and signalling molecules – resulting in improved vascular tone and endothelial function, reduction in inflammation, enhanced cellular resilience to oxidative stress, and activation of pathways that support metabolic and hormonal balance.
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- Flavonoids – berries, tea, onions, apples, soy, cocoa
 - Phenolic acids – coffee, whole grains, and some fruits
 - Lignans – flaxseed, sesame, and whole grains
 - Stilbenes – grapes, peanuts, and red wine





Polyphenols: Phytoestrogens

- Phytoestrogens are polyphenols that are structurally similar to estrogen.
- Main classes:
 - **Isoflavones** (soy, chickpeas, other legumes)
 - **Lignans** (flaxseed, sesame, wholegrains, berries)
 - **Coumestans** (split peas, pinto beans, alfalfa)



Phytoestrogens

- Act as partial agonists/antagonists — “buffering” estrogen effects (eg, relieve symptoms in low-estrogen states, but not overstimulating in high-estrogen states).
- Bind to ER- α and ER- β with (much) weaker affinity than estradiol.
 - but **preferentially bind ER- β** due to structural compatibility, so functioning as **selective estrogen receptor modulators (SERMs)**
 - Influence gene expression → bone, vascular, lipid metabolism.
- In some individuals, the microbiome converts phytoestrogens to the metabolite equol – which exerts stronger oestrogen-like effects in bone, brain, and blood vessels
- Anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties, like any good polyphenol.



Phytoestrogens

EVIDENCE IN MENOPAUSE

- **Vasomotor symptoms:**
 - Meta-analyses show ~25–50% reduction in hot flush frequency/severity with soy isoflavones vs placebo (though effect sizes vary).
 - Equol-producers may see greater benefit.
- **Bone health:**
 - Isoflavones linked to reduced bone loss and improved markers of bone turnover.
- **Cardiovascular/metabolic health:**
 - Soy protein lowers LDL cholesterol, modestly improves endothelial function.
- **Breast cancer safety:**
 - Cohort studies (esp. in Asia) show soy intake **reduces recurrence and mortality** in breast cancer survivors. No evidence of harm.

Phytoestrogens – practical application

- Encourage whole food forms over supplements (though red clover/soy isoflavone extracts sometimes used in studies).
- Aiming for a soy food most days + flaxseed most days = natural, safe, effective strategy



Phytoestrogens & Men



Reproductive Toxicology

Volume 100, March 2021, Pages 60-67



Neither soy nor isoflavone intake affects male reproductive hormones: An expanded and updated meta-analysis of clinical studies

Katharine E. Reed^a , Juliana Camargo^b , Jill Hamilton-Reeves^c , Mindy Kurzer^d , Mark Messina^e  

Gut microbiota-estrogen axis

- The gut microbiome is a principal regulator of circulating estrogens
- **Estrobolome:** the subset of gut microbial genes whose products (enzymes) metabolise oestrogens and thus influence circulating oestrogen levels.



How the estrobolome impacts circulating estrogen levels

- **β -glucuronidase (enzymes produced by commensal bacteria)**
 - Deconjugates oestrogens in the gut → enable reabsorption
 - Low activity → lower circulating oestrogen → worsens low-E symptoms and diseases
 - High activity → excess reabsorption → dysregulated levels, and high estrogen disease states
- **Phyto-oestrogen conversion**
 - Gut microbes convert isoflavones → **equol** (active form)
 - Plant-rich, high-fibre diets foster equol producers
 - Processed, low-fibre diets suppress them



A diverse estrobolome maintains estrogen homeostasis

- **Microbial diversity**
 - Greater diversity = metabolic buffering
 - Maintains oestrogen *homeostasis*
- **Dysbiosis** has an effect on hormone-related disease:
- Endometriosis associated with higher numbers of β -glucuronidase producing bacteria – results in higher circulating estrogen
- Reduced microbial diversity leads to less estrogen reabsorbed in the gut and is associated low estrogen disease states like PCOS and other complications





Gut microbiota-estrogen axis in menopause

- In the menopausal transition, as ovarian oestrogen production fluctuates and declines, peripheral oestrogen metabolism and recirculation becomes more important.
- Estrogen also effects the gut microbiome, and at menopause, greater dysbiosis occurs, which can lead to related health problems
- Dysbiosis or reduced microbial diversity may impair this process, altering free oestrogen levels, possibly affecting symptoms, bone health, cardiovascular risk and cancer risk.

Gut microbiota-estrogen axis

- **Eat for better gut microbial diversity**
 - Consume more plant-based foods (vegetables, legumes, whole grains) supports microbial diversity and gut-health
- **Avoid abrupt dysbiosis**
 - avoid unnecessary antibiotics, heavy alcohol use, processed foods





Nutrition for insulin resistance

Insulin resistance increases at Menopause – leading to weight gain, associated with other health problems – type II diabetes, fatty liver, dementia, breast cancer, heart disease

Dietary approaches that improve insulin sensitivity –

- Plant-based mediterranean diet - rich in fibre, vegetables, nuts, olive oil, plant based protein sources
- Increased protein intake
- Minimise refined sugars
- Strategies to avoid insulin spikes - start meals with non-starchy vegetables
- *(also weight loss, muscle building, stress reduction, improved sleep)*

Nutrition for Bone Health

- **Protein** - Adequate protein intake (1.0–1.2 g/kg/day) supports bone matrix formation and muscle strength.
- **Calcium and Vitamin D** - Calcium (1,000–1,200 mg/day total intake) and vitamin D (800–1,000 IU/day)
- **Magnesium, Vitamin K, and Zinc** - Magnesium contributes to bone crystal structure and vitamin D activation. Vitamin K (from leafy greens and fermented foods) supports osteocalcin carboxylation. Zinc aids collagen formation.
- **Phytoestrogens and Polyphenols** - shown to attenuate bone loss and improve bone turnover markers
- Mediterranean-style and plant-rich dietary patterns - associated with higher bone mineral density and lower fracture risk.

Alcohol in the menopausal transition



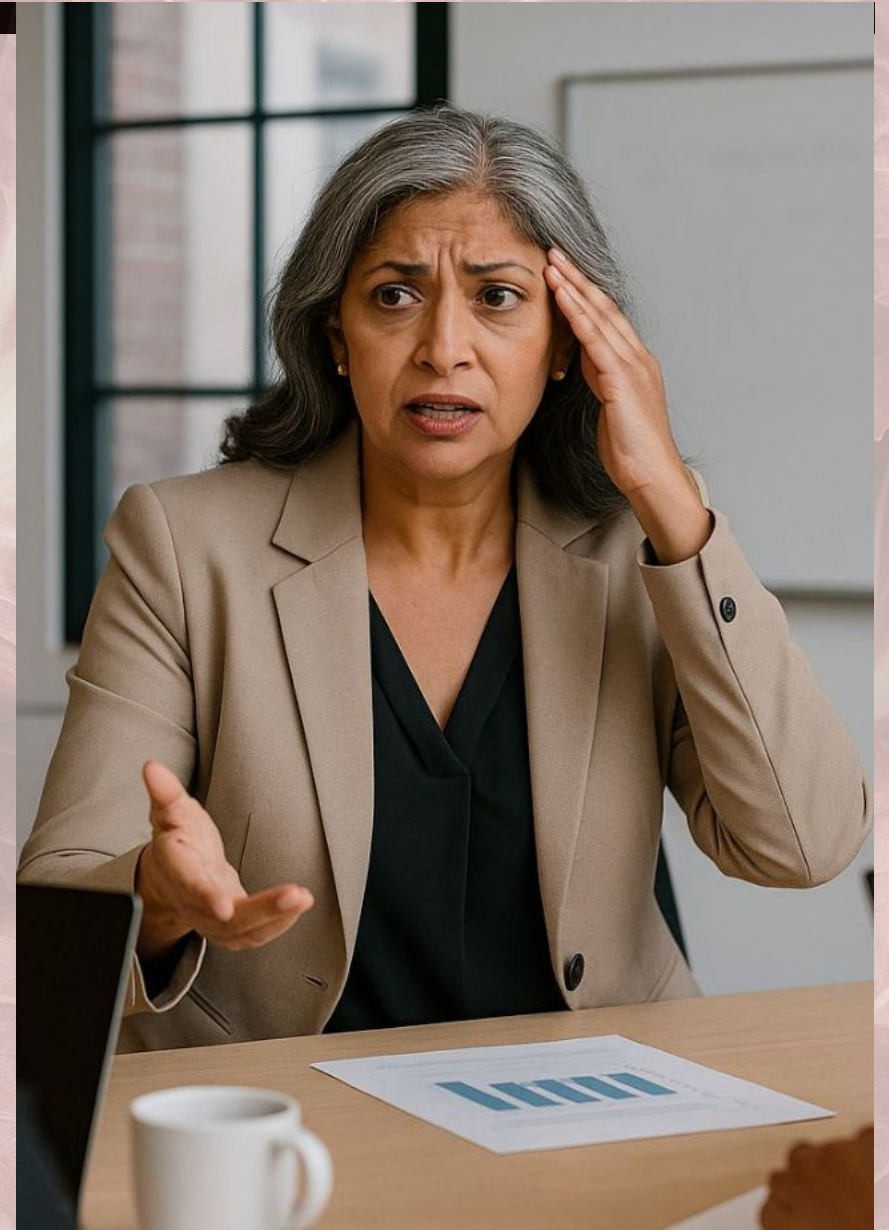
Alcohol in the menopausal transition

During reproductive years:

- Oestrogen stabilises **dopamine**, **GABA**, and the **stress response**

As oestrogen fluctuates and declines:

- Dopamine under-fires → low motivation, flat mood
- GABA under-soothes → tension, anxiety
- Cortisol runs late → wired at night



Alcohol in the menopausal transition

- **Dopamine:** Alcohol gives a short-term boost in dopamine, mimicking the motivation and reward effect normally supported by oestrogen.
- **GABA:** It temporarily enhances GABA activity, producing the same calming, anxiety-reducing effect that drops when oestrogen fluctuates.
- **Cortisol:** Alcohol initially blunts stress hormones but disrupts their rhythm, leading to a 3 a.m. cortisol surge and fragmented sleep.

So that glass of wine feels like relief...

Alcohol in the menopausal transition

DOWNSIDES:

The rebound:

- 3 am wake-up with racing mind
- Fragmented REM sleep
- Elevated next-day anxiety

Long term health consequences

Replacement Strategies

GABA – Calm and inhibition

- Evidence-based GABA-enhancers:
 - **Slow diaphragmatic breathing** (extends exhalation → vagal activation → GABA release).
 - **Yoga, tai chi, meditation**
 - **Magnesium glycinate or threonate supplementation** (small studies show improved GABAergic tone).
 - **Sleep ritualisation** — dimming lights, hot shower, weighted blanket — tells the nervous system it's safe.



Replacement Strategies

Dopamine – Reward and pleasure

- The reward system still needs to *anticipate something nice*.
- Same time, same glass — but kombucha, bitters + soda, or a botanical mocktail.
- Pair it with something sensorially rewarding: music, sunset — anything that gives a micro-hit of interest and pleasure.
- Morning sunlight + movement are powerful dopamine resets
 - even 10 minutes outside boosts tyrosine hydroxylase activity and mood regulation.



Replacement Strategies



Cortisol – The stress blunt

- Alcohol artificially suppresses cortisol but worsens regulation long term.
- What restores proper rhythm is *predictable decompression*:
 - A boundary ritual after work (change clothes, walk the dog, step outside).
 - A brief co-regulation moment with a safe person
 - Time alone, in nature
 - Creative outlets

Let alcohol once
again be a treat, not a
daily necessity



Summary of diet and lifestyle advice for menopause

- Whole-food, plant-rich, mediterranean-style dietary pattern
- Adequate protein for muscle and bone mass
- Adequate calcium, vitamin D, magnesium, and vitamin K for bone health.
- Incorporate phytoestrogen-rich foods such as soy, flaxseed, and legumes
- Limit refined carbohydrates, sugars, and processed foods
- Support gut health with fibre and fermented foods
- Maintain regular physical activity
- Prioritise sleep, stress management, and mindfulness to reduce HPA-axis overactivation
- Moderate alcohol, avoid smoking, and maintain a healthy body composition/weight

Peak overwhelm years

- Perimenopause collides with what sociologists call the “**peak overwhelm years.**”
- Women 40–55 carry the *highest cumulative load* of professional, domestic, and emotional labour (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2022).
- Cortisol and inflammatory markers rise chronically when cognitive and emotional labour remain high without recovery periods (McEwen, *Nat Rev Neurosci* 2017).



Dispatch Stressors and redirect energy

The menopause prescription has to include boundary setting, not just hormone or lifestyle tweaks.

- Reevaluate "Default Roles" and invisible labor
- Set Micro-Boundaries
- Avoid Medicating around bad boundaries
- Build joy and competence back In
- Redirect energy inward
- Lean in to leadership, creativity, wisdom



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Thank you for listening

