

A Guide to Women's Nutrition

*Dt. Nupur Jain**

Women have unique tailor-made nutritional needs which they can fulfill by eating right at every stage of their life. From adolescence till menopause their nutritional needs keep on changing based on various factors like physical state of body, age, level of physical activity etc.

By eating well at every stage, a woman can maintain her healthy weight, good energy levels, good mood and her beauty. Not only this, if the woman of the house is healthy, she will be able to feed and take care of the family in a better way.



Many women are frequently prone to neglecting their own dietary needs. The reasons may vary from woman to woman. For instance she may be too busy in her work or profession to pay attention to her diet and eat whatever comes her way. More likely, especially in an Indian scenario, she may be putting the needs of her family before her own. Or perhaps she inadvertently is sticking to such an extreme diet that leaves her short on vital nutrients and feeling cranky, hungry, and low on energy.



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While what works best for one woman may not always be the best choice for another, the important thing is to build a diet around one's vital nutritional needs. Whether one is looking to improve the energy and mood, combat stress or premenstrual syndrome (PMS), boost fertility, enjoy a healthy pregnancy, or ease the symptoms of menopause, the following nutrition tips can help a woman to stay healthy, active, and vibrant throughout her ever- changing life. The point to remember at the outset is that the requirement of calories, fats and proteins remain more or less the same depending upon the physical activity of a woman except during pregnancy. But the requirement of micronutrients gets changed a lot over a period of time.

Iron

Iron is important throughout life for good health, but the amount needed is different depending on a woman's stage of life. For example, iron needs are higher during pregnancy and lower after reaching menopause. Foods that provide iron include red meat, chicken, turkey, pork, fish, kale, spinach, beans, lentils and some fortified ready-to-eat cereals. Plant-based sources of iron are more easily absorbed by the body when eaten with vitamin C-rich foods. To get both these nutrients at the same meal add tomatoes to lentil soup or dals. Also, to avoid the hindrance in iron absorption avoid tea and coffee with the major meals.

Folic Acid or Folate

Women who are at childbearing stage their requirement for folic acid is very high in comparison to other women to avoid the birth defects. The requirement for a pregnant woman is 600 micrograms (mcg) per day and for breastfeeding women 500 mcg including adequate amounts of foods that naturally contain folate, such as oranges, leafy green vegetables, beans and peas which will help increase their intake of this B vitamin. Along with this, folic acid supplementation can also be done if required. The need for non- pregnant women is 400 mcg.

Calcium and Vitamin D

The requirement of this nutrient gets increased during menopause and post menopause. Because there is a lot of calcium wasting during menopause which leads to weak and fragile bones. To avoid unnecessary bone fractures post menopause, it is important to include calcium rich foods in diet like low-fat or fat-free milk, yogurt and cheese, sardines, tofu, tempeh, soy beans, sesame seeds, green leafy vegetables and calcium-fortified foods and beverages. The requirement of calcium goes as high as 1200 mg/ day which is normally 1000 mg/day. When nutritional needs can't be fulfilled by diet, supplementation becomes essential.

Adequate amount of vitamin D is also important in old age because it enhances the absorption of calcium in the body and strengthens the bones. Good sources of vitamin

D include fatty fish, such as salmon, eggs and fortified foods and beverages, like milk.

Added Sugars and Saturated Fats

Physical activity is an important part of a woman's health. Regular physical activity helps with muscle strength, balance, flexibility and stress management. Since women typically have less muscle, more body fat and are smaller than men, they need fewer calories to maintain a healthy body weight and activity level. Women who are physically more active may require more calories.

To maintain daily calorie requirements, it is important to avoid added sugars in the form of canned juices, aerated beverages, candies, pastries etc. Apart from this focus on unsaturated fats such as vegetable oils, nuts and seeds and limit the intake of saturated fats like fried foods etc.

Diet tips to ease PMS

Women may experience bloating, cramping or fatigue one week before their periods or during that time. It majorly happens due to fluctuations in the levels of hormones. Diet plays an important role in alleviating these symptoms.

- **Eat foods rich in iron and zinc like red meat, liver, eggs, green leafy veggies and dried fruit.**
- **Boost calcium intake like milk and milk products and green leafy veggies.**
- **Avoid trans fats, deep fried foods and sugars.**
- **If your body has a tendency to bloat, cut down the salt intake and avoid processed foods (like ketchup) and salty snacks (like namkeen).**
- **Cut down caffeine and alcohol as both have a tendency to worsen the PMS symptoms.**
- **Add essential fatty acids like omega-3 fatty to ease cramps. One can include this in one's diet in the form of walnuts, flaxseeds and small fish.**

Diet plays a vital role in sustainable health and life free from major health issues. The focus in the article is on women and their health but, in fact, everyone should be particular about including staples like cereals, legumes like lentils and beans, roots like potatoes, fruits & vegetables and food from animal sources like milk, fish eggs. Everything needs to be a part of our diet and there is nothing like 'either/or'. Vitamin, mineral supplements and cosmetics are no substitute for a healthy, well-balanced diet. Given the longevity of life, it is important for all, especially women starting from their formative years to take care of their health through proper nutrition in their diet.

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Expert Speaks

Nutrition, if it happens to be suboptimal, can lead to serious consequences for anyone but more so for a woman. This is because the adverse effects impact not just the woman herself but also her future generations.

This is why optimising nutrition through the life cycle of a woman is the foundation stone of her wellbeing.

Therefore creating awareness about balanced and diverse diets is a significant step in this direction. Thereafter, if for any reason there are unmet nutritional needs, interventions such as supplementation with specific nutrients is the way forward.

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