Flash food

There’s no magic pill, but there are some dietary steps you can take to alleviate the symptoms of menopause.

When American weight-loss pioneer Victor Hugo Lindlahr coined the phrase “You are what you eat” in 1940, it’s unlikely he was thinking of menopausal women. But when night sweats, hot flashes, lack of sleep and snarly moods begin wreaking havoc, many women start eyeing food as the next great messiah. If salvation from this bumpy hormonal journey could be as simple as a daily glug of soy milk, who wouldn’t want to raise a glass? Food is easy and doable, and many of us seek out dietary options before considering hormone therapy.

But does it work?

It depends on what you want to fix. According to Wulf Utian, executive director of the...
North American Menopause Society in Cleveland, a rather long “grocery list” of symptoms has come to be associated with menopausal women. But only three are genuinely related to change in ovarian function: night sweats, hot flashes and vaginal thinning. Moodiness, Utian says, along with irritability, memory loss, fuzzy thinking and lack of sleep are all secondary effects caused by “the big three.” Considering more than 80 per cent of women report hot flashes during perimenopause, it’s understandable that hot flashes (or flushes, my dear, if you reside in the U.K.) are what much of the nutritional research has been fixated on.

Enter soy and flaxseed. Both are phytoestrogens or, in lay terms, dietary estrogens that can mimic the work of the real hormone. When estrogen levels drop in menopausal women, the door opens to those dreaded side effects. It seems logical a steady diet of estrogen plant sources could help. But here’s the flip side: Hormones are extremely complicated, and nutritional science doesn’t seem to have a firm grip on exactly how these phytoestrogens work. The only certainty is that the female body requires a very delicate balance. If there’s too much, estrogen can overstimulate cells in the breast and uterus, which, in some cases, can lead to cancer.

Soy is the only food Toronto registered dietitian Leslie Beck lists under dietary approaches in her chapter on hot flashes and night sweats in The Complete Nutrition Guide to Menopause. “It’s true,” she writes, “that a daily intake of soy has helped a number of my clients ease their hot flashes. But, overall, studies don’t find it to be a stupendously effective remedy. While it does tend to decrease both the frequency and severity of hot flashes, the effects are generally modest or mild. And all the studies find that participating women who receive the placebo also experience some improvements.”

Ah, the placebo effect. Utian talks about it with the kind of wonder only a scientist could emote. “If you look at all the randomized, double-blind studies on hot flashes — without exception — there’s a 30 to 50 per cent placebo response.” He doesn’t know why, but it happens and when it does, women feel relief but not necessarily for the right reason.

Donna Papacosta of Oakville, Ont., wonders if the two tablespoons of ground flaxseed she consumes every day is proof or placebo. The 53-year-old adds one tablespoon to her cereal in the morning, then tucks herself into bed at night after enjoying a yogurt with ground flaxseed. “It’s working,” she says, “as long as I remember to take it. And I am rudely reminded [by hot flashes] when I don’t. Call it placebo or remedy, it works, it’s good for me and it’s full of fibre.”

Despite hundreds of studies, more proof is needed before soy or flax will win the ultimate status of hot flash-eliminating superfood. Perhaps we’re wrong to even hope such a food could come to the rescue?

According to Beck, “There is no magic pill when it comes to preventing disease, losing weight or reducing hot flashes.” But she does believe a well-balanced, healthy diet including soy can help. Beck recommends 20 to 40 milligrams of isoflavones two times daily. Unfortunately, the isoflavone content of soy foods — be it roasted soy nuts, flour, a soy hot dog or a glass of soy beverage — is not listed on food labels. But she says getting your day’s worth is as easy as having a soy smoothie for breakfast and a handful of roasted nuts as an afternoon snack. You’ll just need to count the milligrams.

How? Check out thesoyfoodscouncil.com or the charts in Beck’s book. And there’s a medical caveat: If you are a survivor of estrogen-positive cancer or at risk for this disease, discuss soy food consumption with your GP or oncologist first.

Mairlyn Smith, a Toronto professional home economist and the co-author of Ultimate Foods for Ultimate Health... and Don’t Forget the Chocolate!, agrees with Beck that soy is a healthy food; she drinks an organic, whole-bean soy beverage daily. But she is concerned that women looking to relieve hot flashes by introducing soy into their diets at midlife may have missed the boat. Researchers are unravelling a new twist on what could be loosely termed “the puberty effect.”

Just a few decades ago, epidemiologists discovered a cogent link between the soy-heavy Japanese diet and a decidedly lower incidence of hot flashes among that country’s female population. The numbers revealed that women in Western countries had an 85 per cent incidence of hot flashes while women living in China and Japan had only a 20 per cent occurrence. A storm of studies examining the link between daily soy consumption and hot flashes has followed both in North America and across Asia, and the latest piece in the hot flash puzzle just might be timing. Current research suggests that soy consumption may have to occur during puberty (that other hormone-dominated time) to have an effect on symptoms some 30 years later.

So what’s a menopausal woman to do when she’s in heat?

For Terri Nesbitt of Toronto, managing menopause has meant cutting back on some of the foods and beverages that trigger hot flashes. Red wine was her obvious first cut. “As

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soon as I took a sip, I felt bright red from the waist up. It was worse than all the other hot flashes I was having. These ones made me feel really hot with a sick, nauseous edge to them.”

The 51-year-old hasn’t raised a glass of the red stuff for three years (and doctors will tell you it’s not just red wine, but all alcohol that can trigger hot flashes).

As for Smith, 55, she took a break from red wine for three years because she “glowed friggin’ red” whenever she drank it. She can now safely imbibe without worrying about internal combustion, but caffeine is another story. A few years ago, Smith started waking up, bright eyed and perky, at 3 a.m. every day. After experiencing this for several months, “I figured out that I had to cut out caffeine.” She went cold turkey on coffee, replaced it with green and black tea, but even that beverage is out of the question past 10 a.m.

Caffeine is second on Utian’s list of “things menopausal women should avoid”; spicy food is third and, thankfully, last. He says there’s no scientific evidence; it’s purely anecdotal.

But is there more we can do to douse flashes than simply gobbling up soy and walking away from imbibing? According to Jerilynn Prior, scientific director of the University of British Columbia’s Centre for Menstrual Cycle and Ovulation Research, we need to let go of the notion of good meno-foods and bad meno-foods, and embrace “the whole meal deal.” It isn’t sexy, fast acting or even anything you haven’t heard before: Eat plenty of veggies and fruit; bid farewell to refined, sweet, high-fat foods; and go for the real thing — whole grains, calcium-rich soy beverage or low-fat dairy, lean protein and good fats (omega 3s and monounsaturated) with a nod to probiotics and vitamin D (Prior recommends a daily supplement of 1,000 IUs).

Here’s the menopausal upside of eating healthy: Not only will your diet be rich in fibre, but what goes in will also come out. In other words, vitamin C, beta carotene and lycopene will help combat the bevy of stress hormones that accompany menopause; calcium will guard your bones and help you nod off at night; and soy and flaxseed might offer flash relief. Furthermore, the whole meal deal can help silence secondary symptoms such as lack of sleep, moodiness, irritability, fuzzy thinking and occasional memory loss.

It can also fight something else: a disappearing waistline. Prior says weight gain is a formidable problem for menopausal women, and the cards are stacked against us. The Canadian Multicentre Osteoporosis Study has followed more than 9,000 women and men across the country for more than 10 years, and the news on body mass index isn’t good: It stayed stable in women between the ages of 25 and 45, but showed a 150 per cent increase in women 45 to 55.

Many women gain during this time “even if they are eating and doing all the same things they used to,” says Prior. What’s worse, it’s very difficult to lose weight during menopause. Prior recommends a slow, sensible weight-loss program — warning that menopausal women can lose essential bone mass if they lose too much weight.

It’s also a matter of metabolism, says Toronto registered dietitian Alexandra Anca, making weight loss a higher mountain to climb than ever before. “Many women try dieting when they hit menopause, and it comes back to haunt them. Eating less or skipping meals can lead to a roller-coaster ride in blood sugar levels, setting off hot flashes, mood imbalances and increased appetite.”

A steady regimen of low glycemic index (GI) carbs can come to the rescue. Anca recommends starting off the day with whole-grain cereals or breads and having a serving at lunch, dinner and even right before bed. She’s seen hot flash relief for her menopausal clients using this low-GI carb approach, and also more restful nights thanks to tryptophan, which helps the body manufacture that sleep-inducing chemical called serotonin.

Restful, sweat-free nights and flash-free days…. Is it too much to ask from your daily bread? For some women, it is; hormone therapy may offer a more viable option. But for others, it’s a reasonable request. Not, perhaps, in the shape of a superfood that comes rushing to the rescue vanquishing the highs and lows of hormonal interruptus, but packaged in a common sense approach — somewhere between an apple a day and what Mama always told you.