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Womenâ??s Health Begins on the Plate

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Womenâ??s health often receives special attention around the first week of March as we commemorate International Womenâ??s Day. However, the subject is far too vast to be confined to a single occasion. A womanâ??s life unfolds through several distinct physiological phases, which are broadly classified as adolescence and menstruation, childbearing and breastfeeding, and eventually menopause. Each stage brings its own health challenges and nutritional needs.

To make their way through these transitions successfully, women need both physical resilience and mental strength. One of the most powerful tools available to support this is surprisingly simple: the food that they put on their plate every day. Nutrition influences energy levels, hormonal balance, metabolic health, sleep quality and long-term disease risk. In many ways, the plate becomes the foundation of womenâ??s health across the entire life cycle.

The impact of changing lifestyles

Womenâ??s lifestyles have undergone dramatic changes over the past few decades. With increasing participation in the workforce and greater responsibilities both inside and outside the home, many women today find themselves juggling multiple

roles. The result is more stress, increased competition, and far less time to rest, relax and recharge.

Food habits have inevitably changed as well. Convenience often dictates food choices, leading to greater reliance on ultra-processed foods. The fact remains that everyday dietary decisions have a powerful impact on both short-term well-being and long-term health outcomes.

Interestingly, when women adopt healthy eating patterns, the entire family often follows. In many households, childrenâ??s eating habits mirror those of their mother. A quick look at families where the mother struggles with obesity often reveals similar weight issues among children. This highlights the influential role women play in shaping the nutritional health of the entire household.

Weight and Metabolic Health

With changing food patterns and increasingly sedentary lifestyles, weight gain and obesity among women are steadily rising. Globally, obesity rates have been climbing for decades. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), nearly one in three adults worldwide is overweight, and women often face unique biological and hormonal challenges when it comes to maintaining a healthy weight across different life stages.

The availability of GLP-1 receptor agonist drugs has recently made weight loss appear deceptively simple. Many women are tempted by what seem like quick solutions. However, even when these medications are prescribed, diet remains central to safe and effective weight management.

Without adequate protein intake, these drugs can lead to a loss of muscle mass rather than just fat reduction. Simply becoming thinner does not necessarily mean becoming healthier. Balanced, nutrient-dense diets combined with regular exercise remain the most reliable foundation for sustainable weight management, even as modern health narratives sometimes suggest otherwise.

Sleep, an overlooked pillar of health

Sleep is another crucial factor that is frequently compromised in the busy lives many women lead. Inadequate sleep is strongly linked to weight gain and increased risk of several chronic diseases. Research increasingly shows that sleep and metabolism are closely connected. Studies suggest that sleep deprivation increases hunger hormones such as ghrelin while lowering leptin, the hormone responsible for satiety. This hormonal imbalance can increase appetite and make weight gain more likely.

While good sleep hygiene is essential, the role of nutrition in supporting better sleep is often overlooked. Certain nutrients play a particularly important role in sleep regulation. Magnesium-rich foods such as green leafy vegetables and edible seeds help calm the nervous system. The variety of greens consumed can change according to seasonal availability, making them an easily accessible dietary addition.

Tryptophan, an amino acid found in milk and eggs, supports serotonin production, which in turn influences sleep. This is one reason why warm milk at bedtime has long been recommended in traditional diets. Nuts, especially pistachios, contain melatonin and can serve as a beneficial evening snack. Omega-3 fatty acids are also known to contribute to improved sleep quality.

Equally important is limiting substances that disrupt sleep. Alcohol, excessive caffeine and sugary foods can all interfere with healthy sleep cycles. Breathing techniques can complement dietary strategies for improving sleep. The 4-7-8 breathing technique helps calm the mind and promote relaxation, while Savitri pranayama stimulates the vagus nerve and supports a state of mental calm.

Bladder health, a less discussed concern

A cluster of health problems affecting the pelvic region is common among women. Urinary tract infections (UTIs) are widely recognised because womenâ??s anatomy makes them more susceptible than men.

Another condition that remains relatively under-recognised despite its profound impact on quality of life is known as Bladder Pain Syndrome. This difficult-to-diagnose condition can lead to chronic pelvic pain and severe discomfort. For some women, the distress can become so overwhelming that it affects mental health and, in extreme cases, may even lead to suicidal thoughts. Unfortunately, awareness about this condition remains limited not only among the general public but also within sections of the medical community.

While specialised clinicians play the central role in diagnosing and treating the condition, dietary management can provide critical complementary support. A personalised diet plan can help manage symptoms and maintain remission. The use of calming spices and anti-inflammatory foods, along with supplements such as aloe vera, may help soothe bladder irritation.

While dietary therapy is widely recognised in the management of cardiac, liver or kidney diseases, the concept of dietary support for bladder health is less commonly discussed. In this instance, too, its therapeutic potential is both real and valuable.

Nutrition and Menopause

Menopause marks a life stage during which several health risks increase. As oestrogen levels decline, cardiovascular risk rises due to increases in LDL cholesterol levels. After menopause, womenâ??s risk of cardiovascular disease increases significantly. In fact, heart disease is now recognised as the leading cause of death among women worldwide. A post-menopausal woman is also at greater risk of dying after a heart attack than a man. Other concerns during this phase include bone loss, metabolic changes and cognitive decline. Nutrition therefore becomes particularly important to offset some of these risks.

The nutrients that require special attention include:

- Protein, to maintain muscle mass
- Fibre, to support metabolic and digestive health
- Vitamin D, essential for bone strength and immune function
- Calcium, critical for preserving bone density

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT), which had fallen out of favour for a period, is now receiving renewed attention. Emerging research suggests that HRT may significantly reduce mortality from cardiovascular disease, osteoporosis and dementia when appropriately prescribed. Current recommendations indicate that initiating HRT before the age of 60 may offer the greatest benefit. It is important for women to be aware of these evolving recommendations so that they can make informed decisions about their health.

Although menopause discussions are gaining visibility in urban and elite circles, many women elsewhere continue to suffer in silence. The absence of open conversations and reliable guidance leaves women struggling through nearly one-third of their lives without adequate support. Encouragingly, menopause clinics are now being launched across several government hospitals in Maharashtra as well as in urban health facilities. These centres provide women with an opportunity to discuss their health concerns with professionals and receive meaningful guidance.

Diet as a powerful tool

Today the world is fascinated with artificial intelligence as a transformative tool. An equally powerful tool for humans that we easily overlook lies within our daily control is our diet.

We eat every day, at least two or three times. Small choices repeated consistently can accumulate into powerful long-term effects. Making healthy food choices does not mean being rigid or eliminating enjoyment. Rather, it means building sustainable habits that are followed most of the time, with flexibility for special occasions.

For women in particular, nutrition serves as a powerful ally through every stage of life. From supporting hormonal balance and metabolic health to protecting bone strength, heart health and cognitive well-being, nutrition remains key.

When approached thoughtfully, diet becomes far more than a routine necessity. It becomes one of the most accessible and effective tools for prevention, healing and lifelong health.