



Soyfoods and the Menopause

Key Points

- The menopause is the stage in a woman's life when levels of the female hormones estrogen and progesterone fall and the ovaries stop producing eggs.
- Menopausal symptoms such as hot flushes are thought to arise due to these changes in hormone levels.
- Hormone therapy is often prescribed to help with menopause related health issues; however concerns about its long term safety has resulted in many women looking for alternative, natural solutions.
- Increasingly, evidence indicates that soyfoods are one such alternative. Eastern populations who consume soyfoods as part of their traditional diet experience fewer hot flushes than Western women.
- Results from clinical studies investigating the effects of soyfoods and soybean extracts, such as isoflavones, on hot flushes are encouraging.
- The consumption of soyfoods, with their naturally occurring isoflavones, should be considered by menopausal women who are looking for a natural alternative for relieving hot flushes.

Introduction

The menopause refers to that time in a woman's life when menstruation stops and her ovaries lose their reproductive function. This happens when levels of the female hormones, estrogen and progesterone, fall and the ovaries stop making eggs. The typical age for women to reach the menopause is around 50.

The resulting changes in ovarian hormones, particularly the drop in estrogen, are thought to be the cause of menopausal symptoms in many women. **Hot flushes are the classic sign of menopause, affecting up to 70% of European women.**

Hormone therapy is often prescribed by doctors to help with these menopausal symptoms; however research has raised concerns about its long term safety. As a result many women are looking for natural, alternative solutions.

Menopausal Symptoms

The fall in levels of estrogen and progesterone can begin a few years before menstruation stops and may bring about some uncomfortable physical symptoms including hot flushes.

A hot flush produces a sudden sensation of warmth, or even intense heat, which spreads over various parts of the body, especially the chest, face and head. The frequency and severity of hot flushes varies considerably among women. For most women hot flushes usually last six months to two years, although large numbers of women report having hot flushes up to **20 years after the menopause.**

However there is an international variation in the prevalence of hot flushes. Approximately two-thirds of European and North American women experience hot flushes, whereas only **5 to 18% of Japanese and Southeast Asian postmenopausal women do.** Although to some extent this maybe because these women are reluctant to report having these symptoms, research indicates certain aspects of a **traditional Asian diet may also play a role.** More specifically, it has been suggested that soyfoods, and their respective isoflavones, help to reduce the symptoms of hot flushes.

Soyfoods, Isoflavones and Hot Flushes... the evidence

Isoflavones are natural plant compounds found in soy which are helpful for reducing hot flushes.

Studies in Japan have found that women who regularly eat isoflavone-rich soyfoods have fewer hot flushes than those women who infrequently use soyfoods. In Japan and China older adults typically consume soyfoods in amounts that provide between 25 and 50mg of isoflavones per day. One serving of a traditional soyfood, such as 250ml of soy drink, provides approximately 15 -25mg of isoflavones.





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Since 1995 **more than 50 clinical studies** have investigated the effects of isoflavones on hot flushes. In most of these studies, **there has been a reduction in the frequency and/or severity of hot flushes in comparison to the placebo or control group**. But not all studies show benefit. In part, this may be because the studies were designed differently. For example, some studies included women with very frequent hot flushes, as many as 10 per day whereas other studies involved women with only one or two per day. Also, different intervention products were used - some studies used soyfoods and some used soy extracts.



To get a more accurate interpretation of the results, **several reviews and analyses of the data have been conducted**. One such analysis, that included 11 trials, found that isoflavones were moderately effective, whereas another review found that the data were mixed, so no definitive conclusions could be reached. However even in this review, 5 out of 9 studies found that soy isoflavones significantly improved hot flush frequency and/or severity.

The results of the most recent and comprehensive analysis of the data are very encouraging. Approximately three quarters of the studies reviewed found that women who took isoflavone supplements, similar to the composition found in soybeans, reported a significant improvement in hot flushes compared to the placebo group. **In fact there was a 50% reduction in hot flush frequency and/or severity in the isoflavone group, with most studies using at least 50mg of isoflavones per day.**

Benefits are usually seen within 4 weeks of taking isoflavones and appear to have no significant side-effects.



Conclusions

According to some surveys, **two-thirds of women** entering the menopause experience hot flushes.

Due to the concerns of long term hormone therapy use, women are **seeking natural alternatives** to help with hot flushes.

Incorporating **soyfoods** into the diet is one such alternative as soyfoods are a dietary source of isoflavones.

Most studies show that women taking isoflavones **have a reduction in frequency and/or severity in hot flushes** compared to a placebo group.

Studies have typically used 50mg of isoflavones - the amount found in about two to three servings of soyfoods - and the benefits can be seen from 4 weeks onwards.

Women should consider including soyfoods into their **diet as part of a lifestyle** approach to help manage symptoms associated with the menopause.

Interested? Have a look on www.ensa-eu.org for more details and references or contact us via secretariat@ensa-eu.org

