

High-Protein Meal Ideas for Menopause: 20 Recipes That Preserve Muscle and Promote Fat Loss

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Details:

Now I have sufficient research to write a comprehensive, well-cited article. Let me compose the final piece.

Why Menopause Makes Protein the Most Important Macronutrient in Your Kitchen

Most nutrition advice tells menopausal women to eat less. The science says something more precise: eat **more protein** — strategically, at every meal. The distinction matters enormously, and the gap between those two instructions is where muscle is lost, metabolism slows, and abdominal fat accumulates.

The menopausal transition is associated not only with a decline in estradiol levels, but also with increased visceral adiposity and decreased bone density, muscle mass, and muscle strength. This isn't a passive aging process — it's a hormonally driven cascade with a specific dietary lever: dietary protein intake.

Women have a reduction of 0.6% in muscle mass per year after menopause. One study showed the rate of sarcopenia accelerates dramatically, with a 3% loss of muscle mass in early perimenopause years and a 27% loss of muscle mass in early post-menopausal years. Less muscle means a slower resting metabolic rate, reduced fat-burning capacity, and greater insulin resistance — all of which compound weight gain.

Research published in **BJOG** identifies enhanced bodily protein breakdown as a putative trigger for weight gain during the menopause transition via a mechanism known as the Protein Leverage Effect — it arises when progressive net bodily protein losses induce increased appetite for protein. If there is not a corresponding increase in the dietary protein concentration, the predicted consequence is excess non-protein energy intake — meaning women eat **more total calories** while still being protein-deficient.

The solution is architectural: build every meal around a 25–35g protein anchor. This article gives you 20 complete, kitchen-ready meal ideas to do exactly that — with the science annotated directly on each recipe.

The Science Behind the 25–35g Per-Meal Protein Target

Before diving into the recipes, it's worth understanding **why** this specific range matters for menopausal women, not just older adults in general.

The phenomenon of muscle anabolic resistance describes the impaired stimulation of muscle protein synthesis (MPS) in response to key anabolic stimuli, and is generally accepted to be a fundamental mechanism underpinning the age-related decline in skeletal muscle mass. However, recent evidence

highlights comparable post-prandial rates of MPS between young and older adults when the dose of ingested protein, and constituent leucine profile, exceeds a certain "threshold" in older adults.

Assuming a constituent amino acid profile of ~10% leucine, a 20g protein dose delivers only ~2g of leucine — below the 3g leucine threshold proposed for the maximal stimulation of MPS in older adults. This is why a 25–35g protein meal — not a 15–20g one — is the operative target for this demographic.

Meeting a protein threshold of approximately 25–30g per meal represents a promising dietary strategy to help maintain muscle mass and function.

Research using a cross-over design found that when protein was distributed as 10, 20, and 60g at breakfast, lunch, and dinner (similar to typical U.S. consumption patterns), it failed to maximally stimulate MPS at the first two meals. When balanced at 30g per meal — designed to provide at least 2.5g of leucine at each meal — outcomes improved significantly.

****The practical implication:**** Don't save your protein for dinner. Distribute it evenly across all meals and snacks, starting at breakfast. (For a full breakdown of how to calculate your personal daily target, see our guide on **Macros for Menopause: How to Set Your Protein, Carb, and Fat Targets for Weight Loss**.)

How to Use These Recipes

Each of the 20 meal ideas below is structured with: - ****Primary protein source**** and approximate protein content - ****Estimated macros**** (protein / carbohydrates / fat) - ****Menopausal benefit targeted**** — the specific physiological mechanism each meal addresses

Recipes are organized by meal category: Breakfasts (1–5), Lunches (6–10), Dinners (11–15), and Snacks/Light Meals (16–20). All estimates assume standard serving sizes and average ingredient compositions.

Breakfasts: 5 High-Protein Morning Meals

Starting the day with 25–30g of protein is the single highest-leverage dietary change menopausal women can make. Most women consume fewer than 15g at breakfast — well below the leucine threshold needed to trigger MPS.

1. Greek Yogurt Power Bowl

****Primary protein source:**** Plain full-fat Greek yogurt (200g) + hemp seeds (3 tbsp) ****Estimated macros:**** ~30g protein / 28g carbs / 10g fat ****Menopausal benefit targeted:**** Muscle protein synthesis + bone density

Full-fat Greek yogurt delivers ~17–20g of protein per 200g serving, including casein — a slow-digesting protein that provides a sustained amino acid release. Add 3 tablespoons of hemp seeds (10g protein) and top with mixed berries for polyphenols and fiber. The calcium content (~250mg per serving) directly supports bone density, which declines alongside muscle mass during the menopausal transition. (See our guide on **Essential Vitamins and Minerals for Menopausal Women** for calcium targets by stage.)

2. Smoked Salmon and Egg White Scramble

****Primary protein source:**** 3 whole eggs + 3 egg whites + 60g smoked salmon ****Estimated macros:**** ~33g protein / 3g carbs / 14g fat ****Menopausal benefit targeted:**** Visceral fat reduction + inflammation

Eggs are one of the most bioavailable complete proteins available, with a leucine content of approximately 0.54g per egg. Pairing them with smoked salmon adds omega-3 fatty acids (EPA and DHA), which have anti-inflammatory properties relevant to the pro-inflammatory cytokine environment that accelerates sarcopenia. The decline of estrogen levels is associated with an increase in pro-inflammatory cytokines including TNF- α and IL-6, which may explain the appearance of sarcopenia after menopause. Omega-3s directly counter this mechanism. Serve on a bed of sautéed spinach for magnesium and iron.

3. Cottage Cheese and Chia Overnight Protein Bowl

****Primary protein source:**** 250g low-fat cottage cheese + 2 tbsp chia seeds + 1 scoop whey protein
****Estimated macros:**** ~35g protein / 22g carbs / 9g fat ****Menopausal benefit targeted:**** Overnight muscle preservation + satiety

Cottage cheese is rich in casein protein, making it ideal for overnight muscle protection. Pre-sleep ingestion of slow-release casein provides a sustained "trickle" of leucine that attenuates muscle breakdown without blunting morning anabolic sensitivity — because the body tries to "eat" its own muscle for energy while sleeping, having a slow-digesting protein acts like a slow-release drip, protecting lean mass until breakfast. Prepare this the night before with chia seeds (which add 5g of fiber for gut health) and a half-scoop of whey stirred in. Top with sliced banana for potassium.

4. High-Protein Savory Oatmeal with Turkey and Egg

****Primary protein source:**** 2 eggs + 60g lean ground turkey + ½ cup rolled oats ****Estimated macros:**** ~30g protein / 35g carbs / 12g fat ****Menopausal benefit targeted:**** Glycemic stability + lean mass preservation

Savory oatmeal is an underutilized vehicle for morning protein. Steel-cut or rolled oats provide beta-glucan soluble fiber, which has documented benefits for visceral fat reduction and blood glucose management — both critical during menopause when insulin sensitivity declines. The turkey-egg combination delivers complete amino acids while keeping saturated fat low. Season with turmeric and black pepper for anti-inflammatory curcumin bioavailability.

5. Edamame and Tofu Protein Scramble

****Primary protein source:**** 150g firm tofu + ½ cup shelled edamame ****Estimated macros:**** ~28g protein / 16g carbs / 12g fat ****Menopausal benefit targeted:**** Phytoestrogen support + muscle synthesis

Soy-based proteins provide a complete amino acid profile *and* isoflavones — phytoestrogens that weakly bind estrogen receptors and may help moderate hot flash frequency. Crumble firm tofu into a skillet with edamame, turmeric, nutritional yeast (for B12), and vegetables. This is an especially strong breakfast for women in early perimenopause managing both symptom burden and body composition simultaneously. (See our guide on **Eating for Menopause Symptoms** for the full phytoestrogen-hot flash evidence base.)

Lunches: 5 Midday Meals That Hit the Protein Threshold

Lunch is statistically the most protein-deficient meal for women. Correcting this alone can meaningfully improve daily MPS stimulation.

6. Tuna and White Bean Power Salad

****Primary protein source:**** 150g canned tuna in water + ½ cup white beans ****Estimated macros:**** ~35g protein / 30g carbs / 6g fat ****Menopausal benefit targeted:**** Lean mass + cardiovascular protection

Tuna delivers approximately 25g of protein per 150g serving with minimal fat, while white beans add another 8–10g of plant protein plus 6g of soluble fiber. Low dietary protein intakes are associated with net lean mass loss in postmenopausal women; in the context of energy restriction, high-protein diets not only facilitated weight loss but were also more effective in preserving muscle/lean mass than moderate protein diets. Dress with olive oil, lemon, and capers. Serve over arugula for bone-protective vitamin K.

7. Grilled Chicken and Quinoa Buddha Bowl

****Primary protein source:**** 150g grilled chicken breast + ½ cup cooked quinoa ****Estimated macros:**** ~42g protein / 38g carbs / 9g fat ****Menopausal benefit targeted:**** Sarcopenia prevention + complete amino acid profile

Chicken breast provides approximately 31g of protein per 150g serving — one of the highest protein-to-calorie ratios of any whole food. Quinoa adds a rare plant-based complete protein (all nine essential amino acids), plus magnesium for muscle function. Top with roasted vegetables, tahini dressing, and pumpkin seeds for zinc, which supports testosterone production — a hormone that also declines during menopause and contributes to muscle loss.

8. Lentil Soup with Cottage Cheese Swirl

****Primary protein source:**** 1 cup cooked green lentils + 100g cottage cheese ****Estimated macros:**** ~28g protein / 40g carbs / 5g fat ****Menopausal benefit targeted:**** Gut microbiome + insulin sensitivity

Lentils deliver approximately 18g of protein per cup alongside 16g of fiber — a combination that feeds beneficial gut bacteria (important for estrogen metabolism via the estrobolome) and blunts post-meal glucose spikes. Stirring cottage cheese into the finished soup adds another 11g of protein and a creamy texture without cream. (See our guide on **Gut Health, the Microbiome, and Menopause Weight Gain** for the estrobolome connection.)

9. Turkey and Avocado Lettuce Wraps

****Primary protein source:**** 150g sliced turkey breast + 2 tbsp hummus ****Estimated macros:**** ~30g protein / 18g carbs / 16g fat ****Menopausal benefit targeted:**** Anti-inflammatory fats + lean mass

Turkey breast is among the leanest complete protein sources available. Paired with avocado (monounsaturated fats for hormone synthesis and cardiovascular protection) and hummus (chickpea-based protein and fiber), these wraps are assembled in under five minutes. Use large romaine leaves as the wrap base to eliminate refined carbohydrates entirely. The fat from avocado supports fat-soluble vitamin absorption (A, D, E, K) — micronutrients frequently deficient in menopausal women.

10. Shrimp and Brown Rice Stir-Fry

****Primary protein source:**** 200g shrimp + 1 egg ****Estimated macros:**** ~32g protein / 42g carbs / 8g fat ****Menopausal benefit targeted:**** Thyroid support + lean mass preservation

Shrimp provides approximately 24g of protein per 200g serving and is one of the best dietary sources of iodine and selenium — both critical for thyroid function, which is increasingly compromised during perimenopause. A declining thyroid further slows metabolic rate, compounding menopause-related weight gain. Stir-fry with bok choy, ginger, tamari, and brown rice. Add one scrambled egg to the wok for an extra 6g of complete protein.

Dinners: 5 Muscle-Preserving Evening Meals

Lean mass and strength could be preserved if protein intakes were elevated above the RDA during hypocaloric diet-based weight loss periods — and similar findings have been demonstrated in post-menopausal women. Dinner is where most women already concentrate protein; the goal here is optimizing quality, leucine content, and anti-inflammatory pairing.

11. Baked Salmon with White Bean Mash

****Primary protein source:**** 180g Atlantic salmon + ½ cup white beans ****Estimated macros:**** ~45g protein / 28g carbs / 18g fat ****Menopausal benefit targeted:**** Omega-3 anti-inflammation + muscle synthesis + bone density

Salmon is the nutritional centerpiece of menopause-focused eating — delivering complete protein (~36g per 180g fillet), EPA and DHA omega-3s, and vitamin D (approximately 15–18mcg per serving), which supports both calcium absorption and muscle function. White bean mash replaces mashed potato with a high-fiber, high-protein base. Season with garlic and rosemary; serve with wilted kale for vitamin K2.

12. Turkey Meatballs with Zucchini Noodles and Marinara

****Primary protein source:**** 200g lean ground turkey (4–5 meatballs) ****Estimated macros:**** ~38g protein / 22g carbs / 14g fat ****Menopausal benefit targeted:**** Lean mass + visceral fat reduction (low glycemic load)

Ground turkey meatballs (mixed with egg, oat flour, and herbs) deliver a high leucine load in a satisfying, familiar format. Replacing pasta with zucchini noodles eliminates refined carbohydrates and dramatically reduces glycemic load — critical for managing the insulin resistance that worsens during menopause. Marinara sauce provides lycopene, an antioxidant associated with cardiovascular protection. This meal is also naturally low in sodium if using no-salt-added tomatoes.

13. Chicken Thigh and Chickpea Moroccan Tagine

****Primary protein source:**** 180g bone-in chicken thigh (skinless) + ½ cup chickpeas ****Estimated macros:**** ~40g protein / 35g carbs / 12g fat ****Menopausal benefit targeted:**** Anti-inflammatory spice synergy + complete protein

Chicken thighs are slightly higher in fat than breast meat but deliver more zinc and iron — both critical for energy metabolism and immune function in menopausal women. Slow-cooking with turmeric, cumin, cinnamon, and ginger creates a potent anti-inflammatory spice matrix that addresses the chronic low-grade inflammation characteristic of estrogen decline. Chickpeas add plant protein, fiber, and

phytoestrogens.

14. Beef and Broccoli with Cauliflower Rice

****Primary protein source:**** 150g lean sirloin beef strips ****Estimated macros:**** ~35g protein / 18g carbs / 10g fat ****Menopausal benefit targeted:**** Iron + creatine + lean mass (anabolic support)

Lean red meat is one of the richest dietary sources of creatine — a compound that supports muscle energy metabolism and has emerging evidence for cognitive benefits in older women. It also provides heme iron (the most bioavailable form), vitamin B12, and zinc. Pairing with broccoli (sulforaphane for detoxification and estrogen metabolism) and cauliflower rice (low glycemic load) makes this a metabolically targeted dinner. Limit to 1–2 servings per week to keep saturated fat in check.

15. Baked Cod with Lentil Dal

****Primary protein source:**** 200g cod fillet + ½ cup red lentils ****Estimated macros:**** ~40g protein / 35g carbs / 6g fat ****Menopausal benefit targeted:**** Lean protein + gut health + blood sugar stability

Cod is one of the leanest high-protein fish available (~28g protein per 200g, under 2g fat), making it ideal for women managing caloric intake while maximizing protein density. Red lentil dal — spiced with cumin, coriander, and ginger — provides 9g of plant protein and 8g of soluble fiber per half-cup. The combination supports gut microbiome diversity, which is increasingly recognized as central to estrogen metabolism and weight regulation during menopause.

Snacks and Light Meals: 5 Between-Meal Protein Boosters

Snacks are not optional for menopausal women — they are strategic tools for maintaining the protein distribution needed to maximize MPS across the day.

16. Hard-Boiled Eggs and Edamame

****Primary protein source:**** 3 hard-boiled eggs + ½ cup shelled edamame ****Estimated macros:**** ~25g protein / 10g carbs / 15g fat ****Menopausal benefit targeted:**** Leucine delivery + phytoestrogen

A portable, no-cook snack that delivers a leucine-rich protein hit between meals. Three eggs provide approximately 18g of complete protein; edamame adds 8g of soy protein plus isoflavones. This combination is particularly useful as a mid-afternoon snack to prevent the blood sugar dip that drives cravings for refined carbohydrates.

17. Ricotta and Berry Protein Plate

****Primary protein source:**** 200g part-skim ricotta ****Estimated macros:**** ~26g protein / 18g carbs / 10g fat ****Menopausal benefit targeted:**** Casein protein + calcium + antioxidants

Ricotta is an underappreciated protein source — 200g delivers approximately 26g of protein, predominantly casein, plus ~300mg of calcium. Topped with mixed berries (anthocyanins for anti-inflammatory and cognitive benefits) and a drizzle of honey, this functions as a dessert-like snack that still hits the protein threshold. Particularly useful as an evening snack for overnight muscle protection.

18. Smoked Mackerel Pâté on Rye Crispbreads

****Primary protein source:**** 100g smoked mackerel ****Estimated macros:**** ~25g protein / 18g carbs / 16g fat ****Menopausal benefit targeted:**** Omega-3 fatty acids + brain health + lean mass

Mackerel is one of the highest omega-3 fish available, with approximately 2.5g of EPA+DHA per 100g serving — exceeding salmon in fatty acid density. Blend with cream cheese, lemon, and dill; spread on 3–4 rye crispbreads for fiber. This snack targets the brain fog and mood disruption that accompany menopause via the gut-brain axis omega-3 pathway. (See our guide on **Eating for Menopause Symptoms** for the mood-omega-3 evidence.)

19. Protein Smoothie: Pea Protein, Spinach, and Flaxseed

****Primary protein source:**** 1 scoop pea protein isolate (25g protein) + 2 tbsp ground flaxseed ****Estimated macros:**** ~28g protein / 18g carbs / 8g fat ****Menopausal benefit targeted:**** Plant-based complete protein + lignans (phytoestrogens) + fiber

Pea protein isolate is the gold standard plant-based protein for muscle synthesis — it has a leucine content and digestibility score comparable to whey, without the dairy. Ground flaxseed contributes lignans (plant-based phytoestrogens), 4g of fiber, and ALA omega-3s. Blend with unsweetened almond milk, frozen spinach, and half a banana. This is the ideal option for women who prefer plant-based eating or have dairy sensitivities.

20. Skyr with Walnuts and Pumpkin Seeds

****Primary protein source:**** 200g plain Icelandic skyr ****Estimated macros:**** ~24g protein / 14g carbs / 10g fat ****Menopausal benefit targeted:**** Probiotic support + zinc + muscle synthesis

Skyr is nutritionally similar to Greek yogurt but typically higher in protein per gram (approximately 11g per 100g). It also contains live bacterial cultures that support gut microbiome diversity — relevant to the estrobolome's role in estrogen recycling. Top with 15g of walnuts (ALA omega-3s, anti-inflammatory) and 15g of pumpkin seeds (zinc, magnesium). This snack is particularly useful post-workout when muscle protein synthesis rates are elevated.

Protein Source Quick-Reference Table

Protein Source	Serving Size	Approx. Protein	Leucine Content	Best Meal Use
Chicken breast	150g 31g	~2.4g		Lunch, Dinner
Atlantic salmon	180g 36g	~2.8g		Dinner
Canned tuna	150g 25g	~2.0g		Lunch
Firm tofu	150g 14g	~1.1g		Breakfast, Lunch
Greek yogurt	200g 18–20g	~1.5g		Breakfast, Snack
Cottage cheese	200g 22g	~1.8g		Breakfast, Snack
Skyr	200g 22g	~1.7g		Snack
Eggs (whole)	3 eggs 18g	~1.6g		Any meal
Shrimp	200g 24g	~1.9g		Lunch, Dinner
Lean sirloin	150g 31g	~2.4g		Dinner
Edamame	½ cup 8g	~0.7g		Snack, add-on
Pea protein	1 scoop 25g	~1.8g		Smoothie

Note: Leucine values are estimates based on average amino acid profiles. Combining two protein sources at each meal (e.g., salmon + white beans) is the most reliable strategy for hitting the 2.5–3g leucine threshold.

A Note on Protein Quality: Complete vs. Incomplete Sources

Not all proteins are equal in their muscle-building capacity. It is not protein per se that is needed to stimulate MPS but a greater quantity of essential amino acids (EAAs). Of all the EAAs, leucine appears to be the most potent in activating anabolic signaling, although all EAAs are required to support the leucine-driven increase in MPS.

Animal proteins (meat, fish, eggs, dairy) are complete — they contain all nine essential amino acids in proportions that closely match human muscle tissue. Plant proteins are generally incomplete individually, but strategically combining them (as in lentils + quinoa, or edamame + pea protein) achieves completeness. Women following plant-based eating patterns should pay particular attention to leucine content and may benefit from leucine-enriched plant protein supplements.

Protein intakes during weight loss must be elevated to preserve lean mass. The importance of protein type and quality for muscle mass and function should be considered.

Key Takeaways

- Women lose approximately 0.6% of muscle mass per year after menopause, and dietary protein is the primary nutritional lever to slow this process — making high-protein meals non-negotiable, not optional. - Meeting a protein threshold of approximately 25–30g per meal represents a promising dietary strategy to help maintain muscle mass and function — and the 20 recipes in this article are engineered to hit that target at every eating occasion. - Distributing protein evenly across meals — aiming for at least 30g with approximately 2.5g of leucine at each sitting — produces superior MPS outcomes compared to the typical pattern of skimping at breakfast and front-loading at dinner. - Combining protein sources at each meal (e.g., fish + legumes, yogurt + seeds) is the most practical strategy for hitting the leucine threshold without consuming excessive calories. - High protein in combination with resistance exercise significantly increases fat-free mass — these recipes work best when paired with strength training, not as a standalone intervention.

Conclusion

Protein is not a trend for menopausal women — it is a physiological imperative. Progressive weight gain year-on-year, sufficient to drive significant increases in the prevalence of overweight and obesity, is a well-recognized feature of the menopause transition, together with quantitatively smaller but similarly important losses of lean tissues, chiefly muscle and bone. The 20 meal ideas in this article are designed to interrupt that trajectory at the kitchen level, translating the science of muscle protein synthesis into plates that are practical, satisfying, and sustainable.

Start with breakfast. Distribute protein evenly. Prioritize leucine-rich sources. Combine animal and plant proteins where possible. And use these recipes as a template — not a rigid prescription — that you adapt to your preferences, cultural food traditions, and stage of the menopausal transition.

For the full dietary picture, explore the companion resources in this series: the **7-Day Menopause Weight Loss Meal Plan** for a fully built week of meals using these principles, the **Macros for Menopause** guide for personalizing your daily protein target, and **Why Menopause Causes Weight Gain** for the hormonal science that makes every recipe here medically meaningful.

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