

Managing Midlife Weight Gain

Many women point to menopause as a watershed time when weight becomes an issue, even if it never was before. Our metabolism slows, we lose muscle and gain fat. In addition, much of this extra fat goes around the waist, and as our waistlines expand, so do our health risks. There's a big difference between fat on our bellies and fat on our butts, and belly fat is the dangerous one (better to be a pear than an apple!). It increases our risk of health problems such as high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, incontinence, arthritis, gall bladder disease and breast cancer.

Researchers still can't agree as to why we gain weight in midlife. Is it related to hormonal changes at menopause, ageing in general, or our lifestyles (less activity, more food)? Irrespective of the source, there is plenty you can do about it. Midlife weight gain may be common, but it's not inevitable. Here are some keys to managing it.

RETHINK YOUR DIET

Emphasise real foods and foods that suit your metabolic type over refined and processed foods. Don't try to drastically reduce your kilojoule intake because that slows your metabolism.

Midlife women may have to cut back on grain products — even whole grains — to lose weight. Grain is used to fatten animals and it can do a good job of that in humans too. In addition, some of us are allergic to wheat or grains containing gluten. If you overeat or crave certain foods, that's a clue that your diet needs an overhaul.

A relationship seems to exist between gluten sensitivity and our hormones. In response to inflammation of the gut caused by gluten, the adrenal glands produce more of the stress hormone cortisol. This increases body fat, fatigue and unstable moods. Gluten, hormonal imbalance and overweight can go hand-in-hand, and it can take months for this inflammation to settle.

In addition, since the enzyme that helps break down milk sugar is destroyed by gluten sensitivity, you can become lactose-intolerant if you are gluten intolerant. So in addition to cutting out gluten products you may also need to eliminate milk products at least until your gut has healed. Remember that some people who can't tolerate pasteurised cows' milk can tolerate unpasteurised products or sheep or goats' milk products. People who are gluten sensitive may also be sensitive to soy.

Avoid overeating. Moderate portions and regular, well-balanced meals help to keep your blood sugar stable, and this is essential for keeping your hormones balanced and your weight in check. Women who take in more kilojoules than they burn have high levels of estrogen as well as being overweight. When their levels of estrogen drop at menopause, this can be dramatic and they can experience more pronounced menopausal symptoms.

Eat slowly, chew well and really taste your food. Some women claim that they love food too much to cut down on the unhealthy things. What's more likely is that they use food to numb their feelings, and it's not so much something they love but something they're addicted to. Countries like Italy and France where people really do have a love affair with food don't have anything like the level of obesity we have.

Many women try to lose weight by eating a low-fat diet, but this is hard to stick to. It's also unhealthy. Good dietary fats give us energy, and a healthy brain, hormones, skin, bones and joints. It's a fallacy that they make us fat, unless you eat too much. Drinking water is an important part of maintaining a healthy weight. Often we think we are hungry when we are actually thirsty. To identify how much water you need to drink per day, multiply your body weight in kgs by .033. For example, if you weigh 65 kgs, that's 2.1 litres of water. Drinking this progressively across the day works best — half a glass every half an hour keeps the body well hydrated, rather than going without for hours, then downing a couple of glasses that the body soon discards. A glass of water 15 minutes before meals also helps to ensure that you're hungry not thirsty.

Finally, have something to do in the evening besides watching TV. After seeing all those food ads, you'll probably feel like snacking! Set your environment up to support you and only keep healthy foods on hand.

GET MOVING

Exercise is essential to looking and feeling great as you age. The most effective exercise for weight loss seems to be a mix of aerobic exercise and weight training. You can either alternate resistance training with aerobic training, or add some aerobic exercise to your resistance session.

Switching aerobic activities seems to be more effective than doing the same thing over and over. Trying something new keeps your body having to adapt. Even if you like repetitive activities, it works to change the stimulus about every three weeks. For example, if you enjoy jogging you can add some bursts of quicker running.

You may have heard that short bursts of intense exercise (30 seconds to 3 minutes) promote weight loss better than 'steady state' exercise. That's true, but you have to start at a lower intensity before you can exercise at a higher intensity, so start where you can and go from there. If your favourite exercise is walking, keep it up because it provides many health benefits, but bear in mind that unless you're really stepping out, it may not be intense enough for you to lose weight.

Weight training that uses large muscle groups helps to reverse the tendency for your body to lose muscle, gain fat, and get weak and saggy as you get older. Muscle is what gives your body a smooth, firm shape, and between the ages of 50 and 80 we lose 30-40% of our muscle tissue unless we compensate with weight training. Learn to lift weights correctly so you don't injure yourself.

Supplement your cardio and strength training with stretching to keep flexible and balance training to ensure that you retain this important capacity. Pilates and yoga are also excellent for developing core strength, staying mobile and improving your posture and balance. Ideally, aim for a mix of different types of exercise that will provide all of these benefits.

GET ENOUGH SLEEP AND DEAL WITH STRESS

Insufficient sleep and stress both raise your cortisol (stress hormone) levels, which increase insulin production and belly fat, so don't let poor sleep or chronic stress go

unchecked. Bear in mind that some medications (e.g. anti-depressants) can increase your weight, so check out the side-effects of anything you've been prescribed.

WATCH YOUR HORMONE BALANCE

Sometimes, midlife weight gain signals an underactive thyroid. If you think this could be an issue for you, get it checked out.

RAMP UP YOUR SELF-ESTEEM

If you've never really accepted yourself and your body, then this is the time. Don't be miserable over a couple of extra kilos if you're an active, otherwise happy and healthy woman. Just keep to a healthy regime. Some of us don't lose weight easily, but our health benefits just the same.

Finally, what's fabulous about middle-age is that it gives us a chance to recreate our lives. Let's face it, we were virtually babies when we made a lot of our earlier life choices. So get passionate and purposeful. If you aren't in love with your job, work out what else you want to do. If the kids are now living their own lives, find a new project to inspire you. If your relationship has become ho-hum, give it a shot of whatever's missing. If you're up for a new relationship, go out and have fun. And if you've neglected yourself, it's an opportunity for self-nurturing. It's your life — create the most delicious one possible!

FURTHER READING

Victoria Moran provides a wonderfully well-balanced approach to managing your weight in *Fit from Within: 101 simple secrets to change your body and your life — starting today and lasting forever* (2002).

Pamela Peeke *Fight Fat after 40* (2001).