

## Managing weight gain after menopause

Have you noticed a few extra pounds padding your waistline? A familiar complaint among women in their 40s and 50s---You may be in the throes of midlife expansion. During this time either you gain weight or you find that maintaining your usual weight has somehow become more difficult. You also discover that the weight you gain tends to accumulate around your abdomen, rather than your hips and thighs.

But you don't have to accept weight gain as inevitable. Take steps to prevent weight gain before it starts. And if you've already begun adding to your waistline, it's never too late to reverse course through proper diet and exercise.

## Causes of middle age weight gain

For most women, increases and shifts in weight begin during perimenopause, the years leading up to menopause. On average, women gain about a pound a year during this time.

But changing hormone levels associated with menopause aren't necessarily the cause of weight gain. Genetics, aging and lifestyle factors play a big role in your changing body composition.

- **Exercising less.** Menopausal women tend to exercise less than other women, which can lead to weight gain.
- **Eating more.** Eating more means you'll take in more calories, which are converted to fat if you don't burn them for energy.
- **Burning fewer calories.** The number of calories you need for energy decreases as you age because aging promotes the replacement of muscle with fat. Muscle burns more calories than fat does. When your body composition shifts to more fat and less muscle, your metabolism slows down.
- **Genetic Factors:** Genetic factors may play a role in weight gain as well. If your parents and other close relatives carry extra weight around the abdomen, you may be predisposed to do so, too.

Weight gain can also have serious implications for your health. Excess weight increases your risk of high cholesterol, high blood pressure and insulin resistance, which can lead to diabetes. These factors also put you at increased risk of heart disease and stroke.

There's also evidence that weight gain during the menopausal years increases breast cancer risk. Women who gain in excess of 20 pounds after menopause increase their breast cancer risk by nearly 20 percent. But women who lose weight after menopause can reduce their risk of breast cancer by that much and more — women who lose 20 pounds after menopause reduce their breast cancer risk by as much as 23 percent. Even smaller amounts of weight loss after menopause lead to a modest risk reduction.

## What you can do to prevent or reverse weight gain

There's no magic formula for avoiding weight gain as you get older. The strategies for maintaining a healthy weight at any age remain the same: Watch what you eat and get moving.

The most effective approach to reversing weight gain after menopause includes a combination of the following:

- **Increase your physical activity.** Aerobic exercise boosts your metabolism and helps you burn fat. Strength training exercises increase muscle mass, boost your metabolism and strengthen your bones.

You can become more physically active even without starting a formal exercise program. Just spend more time doing the things you love that also get you moving. Do more gardening and dancing. Take longer walks or try out a bike. Make it your goal to be active for a total of 30 minutes or more a day on most days.

Increased physical activity, including strength training, may be the single most important factor for maintaining a healthy body composition — more lean muscle mass and less body fat — as you get older.

- **Reduce calories.** Pay attention to the foods you're eating and slightly reduce the amount of calories you consume each day. By choosing a varied diet composed mainly of fruits and vegetables, you can safely cut back on calories and lose weight. Be careful not to cut back too drastically on calorie intake, or your body will respond by conserving energy, making extra pounds harder to shed.

Because your metabolism slows as you get older, you need about 200 fewer calories a day to maintain your weight as you get into your mid- to late 40s. This shouldn't be a problem if you eat only when hungry and only enough to satisfy your hunger.

- **Decrease dietary fat.** Eating large amounts of high-fat foods adds excess calories, which can lead to weight gain and obesity. Limit fat to 20 percent to 35 percent of your daily calories. Emphasize fats from healthier sources, such as nuts and olive, canola and peanut oils.

## Dealing with life's changes

Inevitably, your body shape changes as you get older, shrinking here, sagging there and expanding in the places where you want it least. So what if you can't fit into your old jeans? Eat a little less and exercise a little more, and you'll be doing a lot to maintain your health and vitality.