Menopause and Weight Gain: Explaining Middle Age Spread

by ANGELA FINLAY

Explaining Menopause and Weight Gain — and How to Stop It

Whether you're just noticing the first signs of menopause or you've been struggling with symptoms for years, there's a good chance that weight gain has crossed your mind. Pants get tighter, belts get looser, and bellies get softer — changes that can be difficult to handle as you juggle your other menopause symptoms.

Gaining a few extra pounds with age is incredibly common, but it's not universal. If you look around, you'll find that plenty of middle-aged women can sustain a healthy weight, and they don't look too miserable, either.

So what's their secret? A lot comes down to smart shifts in lifestyle and perspective to keep up with your changing biology.

What Causes Weight Gain During Menopause?

There's no doubt about it: aging can be a drag. Physical and mental changes are bound to come, and they may begin to escalate around the midlife mark.

The bad news is that some predictably problematic changes happen after age 50, often resulting in more body fat (and a bigger waist measurement). Not only do you have to worry about the effects of menopause on self-esteem, but you also need to be concerned about your physical health.

Metabolism Slows

Metabolism is a fairly individual thing, but even if yours has been rather peppy in the past, it's likely to decline as you move through adulthood. In general, you burn calories more slowly as you age, which means most people will have to eat less to maintain their energy level.

Of course, that's easier said than done, especially when you've been set in your eating habits for decades.

Activity Declines

It's natural for your exercise routine to dip when you're busy, but when you add in uncomfortable menopause symptoms like headaches, fatigue, insomnia, and hot flashes, you're even less likely to squeeze in a workout each day.

Of course, less activity combined with a slowing metabolism will leave you with excess calories, so if you don't scale back your calorie intake, you'll begin to carry them around in the form of fat.

Fat Changes

Everybody has fat on their bodies — it's absolutely necessary for energy and good health. However, there's good fat and bad fat (known respectively as brown fat and white fat), and as you get older, you lose the good brown fat and gain the bad white fat.

White fat tends to cling to the abdomen and hips, and your body can't burn it for fuel as easily as it uses brown fat. The result? More stubborn pudge around your middle.

Stress Adds Up

Menopause is a stressful time. Not only are you dealing with menopausal symptoms, but you have life stressors.

High levels of stress can contribute to weight gain, this according to researchers from Kings College in London, United Kingdom.

A relatively new study from researchers at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia, investigated the link between depressive symptoms and weight gain in women based on menopause status. They are trying to determine how depressive symptoms, stress, eating, and menopausal weight gain were related.

What they found was that stress eating during menopause played an important part in the depression-weight association. In other words, moods during menopause affected weight gain and weight outcomes.

The Hormonal Changes of Menopause

The hormonal changes of menopause make it easier to gain easier around the waist and abdomen. Lower levels of estrogen can make you want to eat more and reduce your energy, so you are less physically active.

The lower levels of estrogen may also cause your body to use starch and blood sugar less effectively. When the blood sugar and starch are not doing what they are supposed, it is harder to lose weight.

In 2012, International Menopause Society conducted a study where researchers reviewed decades of research on weight gain and menopause. What they found was that hormone levels affect the distribution of body fat - in particular, centering it towards the waist.

The weight gain accumulation can increase the risk of insulin resistance and cardiovascular disease.

In a second study – this one from 2013 – researchers from the Mayo Clinic compared fat tissue in pre-menopausal to that of post-menopausal women of similar ages. What they found was that the two cellular enzymes responsible for producing and storing fat were more active in the post-menopausal women.

The researchers felt that lower levels of estrogen played a part in the enzymes being active. They further noted that the decreased metabolism might also contribute to weight gain.

Diet and Lifestyle

The signs of menopause start to affect our lives, as do the stresses of getting older. Sometimes, we comfort eat in response to stress.

Many women also become less active after age 40 because their lives are busy. And less activity means less muscle mass and weight gain.

One study reported in the journal *Menopause* reported on 17,000 post-menopausal women who were either assigned to control group not using hormone therapy or a group that was on a healthy diet.

After one year, the diet group was experiencing fewer hot flashes and was three times as likely to have lost weight. But the weight loss wasn't the significant part.

In fact, the reduced symptoms – which were a part of healthy eating – also played a role in the weight loss.

Genetics

Genetics plays a part in menopausal weight gain. If women in your family – especially your mother – have weight issues during menopause, it is possible you will too.

Genetics affect when menopause starts and sometimes, they affect symptoms, too. For example, one 2016 led by researchers from School of Medicine at UCLA, Los Angeles, California, has found certain gene variants affect the brain receptors that regulate estrogen.

These gene receptors are present in all ethnic groups and women who have these variants experience more hot flashes than women who don't. If genes affect hot flashes, chances are they affect other menopause symptoms, including weight gain.

Next page: tips on how to lose menopause weight.

How Do You Lose Weight During Menopause?

Although it may seem like the odds are against you, menopause weight gain is not inevitable. There are several ways to stop weight gain during menopause and help your body adjust to new conditions, and it's important to try some of these new approaches before the number on the scale climbs too high.

After all, being overweight puts you at risk for diseases like diabetes, heart disease, and cancer.

Keep Moving

For most healthy adults, aerobic activity is recommended. If your life is particularly busy, remember brisk walking counts towards aerobic activity.

Even if you are walking 20 minutes to a half hour daily, you are still making significant strides in managing your weight and being active.

You can walk more by:

- Parking further away from your workplace or other destination.
- Taking the steps instead of the elevator, especially when you are only taking a flight or two of stairs.
- Walk instead of driving for short trips.
- Schedule walks about your office building during your work day so you are not sitting all the time.

Every little bit of activity helps you to keep moving and keeps you active.

Skim Portions

To maintain weight – and even lose weight – you might consider consuming 200 fewer calories per day than you did before age 40.

To reduce calories without losing valuable nutrients, pay attention to what you eat. Choose more fruits and vegetables, and whole grains, and stay away from fatty and processed foods.

And don't forget the healthy proteins. For some reason, women start cutting back on the protein in their diets as they get older, without understanding that increasing protein will actually help them lose weight.

One 2014 report in the journal, *Nutrition & Metabolism*, confirms diets high in healthy proteins positively affect

weight control and a feeling of fullness, so individuals don't overeat.

Of course, people need to be careful what types of proteins where are consuming, as some are still high in fat content, such as red meats. But many lean meat choices, (i.e., chicken and fish), and legume proteins (i.e., lentils or quinoa) are beneficial to weight management.

Remember, starving yourself is not the answer — just examine nutrition labels more closely, turn down second helpings, and be sensitive to cues that your stomach is satisfied.

Focus on High-Quality Calories

It's time to adopt a new mantra: "nutrients over calories." Instead of counting every calorie you take in, concentrate on the vitamins, minerals, and nutrients that grace each plate.

When you choose foods with more nutrients in every bite, you'll find that you're consuming fresh fruit, vegetables, whole grains, and quality proteins — filling ingredients that are naturally lower in calories. Most packaged foods, fried foods, sugary foods, and too much alcohol have no place in a healthy diet, especially after menopause.

Reduce your Sugar Intake

Even if you are not eating desserts, you could still be consuming huge amounts of sugar from sweetened beverages, including juices, soft drinks, and sweetened coffee.

Cutting back on these types of drinks could significantly reduce your daily caloric intake.

Get More Sleep

Menopausal symptoms, especially hot flashes, can keep you up at night. Lack of sleep affects ghrelin hormones, the hormones that affect how hungry you are.

In 2014, researchers from Stanford University, Palo Alto, California, confirmed the effect ghrelin hormones had on weight gain.

The Stanford study recruited over 1,000 people and found those who slept less had higher ghrelin levels. The study participants with higher ghrelin levels also had higher body mass and weighed more.

The National Sleep Foundation recommends 7 to 9 hours of sleep for most healthy adults. If you are getting less, you may want to talk to your doctor about managing nightly hot flashes and other symptoms that are affecting your ability to fall asleep and stay asleep during the night.

Strengthen Muscles

It gets harder to build muscle as you age, so you might need to up your strength training routine. However, it's well worth your time to pick up the free weights or try your hand at resistance training, because more muscle mass means a faster metabolism, and more energy throughout the day to work off any extra calories.

If you're not sure where to start, why not book a session with an experienced trainer to get some helpful advice and a surge of motivation?

The Bottom Line...

There's no overnight solution to weight gain, and weight maintenance never comes in the form of a fad diet. The keys to lasting, healthy weight management are education, self-care, and commitment.

Fortunately, you have the willpower and tools to use all of those elements for a lean and energetic body now, and in the years to come.