

Menopause and Weight Gain Information Leaflet

Many women feel that their weight gets harder to manage the older they get. We often approach menopause already struggling with our weight, and then IT JUST GETS EVEN HARDER.

Causes of Weight Gain in Menopause

Fluctuating and falling hormone levels around menopause can affect the way we store fat. This is because our bodies want to store fat for later - a bit like "puppy fat" at puberty. We develop "insulin resistance" making our bodies store, rather than burn, calories.

How the body handles food also changes: For example, if you eat 1000 calories before menopause you will burn 700 and maybe store 300. After menopause you will store 700 and burn only 300.

When women gain weight after menopause the distribution of where it settles alters: An extra pound before the pre-menopause will settle evenly over hips, bottom, thighs and arms. After the menopause it ALL goes round the middle! This leads to more of an apple than a pear shape - hence the term "middle age spread". So, even a small weight gain can result in a change of clothing size.

Our body needs less energy. Studies suggest we may need around 200 calories a day less than we did in the past.

We tend to move less too – aches and pains and stiffer joints as well as fatigue makes exercise seem impossible. The menopause can also play havoc with bladder control which can put some women off exercising. All of which means we burn up less energy.

We also lose muscle mass – known as sarcopaenia – at around 8% per decade after age 40. Muscle is more metabolically active – meaning it burns more energy – helping us to lose weight even when we are sitting still. So, less muscle = less calories burned = more weight gain.

Other Effects

The psychological impact of menopause can also lead to weight gain – getting demoralised about our changing/ageing appearance, anxieties about relationships, finances or our own or a loved one's health, as well as caring for elderly relatives or grandchildren and possibly feeling overwhelmed in work due to brain fog all cause extra pressure and stress which can lead to comfort eating - and drinking.

Women often complain that HRT causes them to gain weight. Some women resist taking HRT for fear of weight gain but there is no scientific evidence that HRT causes weight gain. A very small group of women may develop fluid retention with HRT (up to 10lbs in a month) but generally it is mild and will balance out in a month or two. In fact, HRT may prevent abdominal fat building up. HRT should also improve sleep and other menopause symptoms; therefore giving more energy and motivation to commit to healthy eating and exercise.

What can we do?

- Eat smaller portions – we need less food than we used to. Every year over the age of 40 years - our Basal Metabolic Rate (BMR - the rate at which we burn off calories) slows down. Make sure that portion is full of good nutritious food that will protect health as well as help weight. Reduce the intake of sugar and processed foods– enemies of weight-loss and more likely to increase abdominal fat.
- Be mindful of alcohol intake – empty calories!
- Keep active. Studies show that exercise (especially in the cold) increases our fat-burning. And, the more we exercise the more we strengthen our muscles and bones. Women's muscle mass declines around menopause. Muscle is efficient at burning calories - doing resistance work and lifting weights will increase muscle. An increase of 2kg of muscle = a 10% increase in BMR. Developing strong and toned muscles will make clothes fit better, as well as increase self-confidence.
- Wherever possible, address stress. Cortisol, the stress hormone, encourages abdominal fat deposition. Talk to friends, family, work colleagues and your healthcare professional about ways of reducing commitments, worries and menopause symptoms.

Choose the Menopause as a time of life to try and bring out the best in yourself. Take more exercise and eat a healthier diet, this will have the added benefit of helping you cope better with menopausal symptoms. And, don't forget that the risk of breast cancer, heart disease, diabetes and other issues are also increased by our weight. So, losing excess weight protects us.

This leaflet can be made available in different formats on request. If you would like to make any suggestions or comments about the content of this leaflet, then please contact the Patient Experience Team on 0151 702 4353 or by email at pals@lwh.nhs.uk

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