

## **Midlife Weight Gain – What to Know, What To Do**

Depending on the research you read, the average woman puts on as little as five pounds or as many as 15 during the peri and menopausal years. By the ages of 40 to 59, two thirds of American women are overweight with a BMI (body mass index) of 25 to 25.9 or obese (BMI of 30 or more), split evenly between the two categories. The healthy range for BMI is 18.5 to 24.9 for women.

Even if you are not obese, you are at increased risk for conditions like heart disease, diabetes and breast cancer. Midlife weight gains of slightly more than 20 pounds can also raise your risk for cancer of the colon and uterine lining.

Abdominal or “belly” fat tends to increase by 50% as women approach and go through menopause. The extra fat in this area, (visceral fat) is strongly correlated to the inflammatory process which causes disease. Basically, if you are overweight or obese your fat cells are supersized and more likely to burst. This leaves behind a glob of fat in your bloodstream which your body treats like an enemy invader. It sends out inflammatory proteins called macrophages whose job is to destroy this enemy. A chronic state of inflammation, however, causes the body’s natural protective mechanisms to go a little nuts, which can lead to problems like insulin resistance, diabetes and heart disease.

Girth, or “waist management” is the most effective measurement of health. According to research, a waist size of 35 inches or more puts you at an increased risk for some medical conditions like those mentioned above, and high cholesterol and high blood pressure.

Declining estrogen levels may be one of the reasons for women’s expanding midsection during midlife. The good news is that just a 20% drop in weight can reduce your risk of heart disease and type II diabetes. It can also reduce the pressure on your joints and the risk of developing osteoarthritis (the heavier you are, the higher your risk of developing osteoarthritis in your knees).

Again, you don’t have to release a lot of weight in order to reap the benefits of better health. And it is true that in most cases your metabolism is slowing down by the time you reach midlife and your lean muscle mass is on the decline. But you can exercise (pun intended!) a LOT of control in these areas the minute you accept where you are and adjust your lifestyle accordingly.

The first **step to offsetting age-related metabolic decline is to switch up your diet.** A Women’s Health Initiative Study showed that women who ate healthy fats, lots of fruits, vegetables and whole grains and lean protein were less likely to gain weight than women who ate a higher fat and refined carb diet.

Don’t panic! If you’re not active right now, get active. Start moving. Moderately intense cardio (brisk walking) 30 minutes a day, 5 days a week or intense cardio (running) 20 minutes a day, 3 days a week is the exercise recommendation from the American College of Sports Medicine. Add 8 to 10 strength training exercises, doing 8 repetitions of each exercise, twice a week.

Sound like a lot? Make a commitment to add just one small change at a time. Aim for a 30 minute walk 3 times a week to start. Resist the “all or nothing” tendency – something is always better than nothing. Build on your successes.

Trim down your “menopot” or keep yourself from getting one by adding these to your life:

**Avocados:** They provide high doses of monounsaturated fats (MUFAs), as do nuts, flaxseeds and olive oil. Eating MUFAs can prevent the deposition of fat around the midsection according to recent research.

**Egg Whites:** With all the advantages of protein but almost none of the fat, egg whites fill you up, and preserve muscle tissue. Studies show that people who increased their intake of healthy proteins 25 to 30% of a sensible diet released more abdominal fat and cut back on total calorie intake overall. Lean cuts of chicken, turkey and fish and whey protein are also good.

**Green tea:** While the exact mechanism isn't totally understood, green tea's phytochemicals compounds may speed up the body's metabolic rate, trigger the release of fat and promote fat burning according to research. Aim for 3 cups a day.

**Sour cherries:** The antioxidant properties in certain fruits (including blueberries and cranberries) – particularly anthocyanins - have a protective effect, which aids in weight release.

**Whole grains:** Keep insulin levels lower, and blood sugar levels steady which can help burn abdominal fat. Obese adults who ate 4 to 7 daily servings of whole grain foods as part of a healthy weight release diet lost twice as much abdominal fat as those eating the refined foods (The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition).

**Sleep:** Numerous studies suggest that poor sleep increases your levels of ghrelin, the hunger hormone, and limits the level of leptin, the satiety hormone. Get at least 7 solid hours per night and consult your doctor if you're having trouble sleeping more than once or twice a week.