Weight gain and menopause

Weight gain during perimenopause and menopause is one of the most common and distressing symptoms women experience. In fact, over half of all women are affected.

Excess weight often accumulates around the middle, changing body shape and composition, and overall weight-related health risk factors. On average women may gain around 1.5 kg per year during perimenopause, with an average total weight gain of 10 kg.

Why does menopause weight gain happen?

Perimenopause is often described as the 'perfect storm' for weight gain, with hormonal, metabolic and lifestyle changes all having an effect.

As estrogen levels decline, the body becomes more prone to laying down visceral fat (internal fat) around the abdomen, unlike more evenly distributed gains experienced before perimenopause.

The body loses lean muscle tissue through the normal pattern of ageing, which causes metabolic rate (the rate at which the body uses calories) to reduce.

A more sedentary lifestyle can occur for some women while others may consume slightly more calories. The amount you eat and drink, as well as how much you move, remain the most significant factors in controlling weight.

Does HRT cause weight gain?

Despite many women experiencing weight gain while taking Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) to manage menopause symptoms, there is no evidence to support the theory that HRT is responsible for weight gain. Some women may experience side effects of bloating and fluid retention with some HRT application types, but this typically settles over time.

Should I be concerned about menopause weight gain?

When fat accumulates around the middle it can have a greater effect on health than if it accumulates around the hips. The body can become less sensitive to the hormone insulin and in turn adverse changes in blood sugar levels, cholesterol and blood pressure become more likely.

There are many ways to assess whether weight is something you should be concerned about. Body Mass Index (BMI), dress size, waist circumference and a simple weight measure on the scales can all be useful. However, when it comes to the risk your weight poses to health, one of the best indicators is 'Waist to Hip' ratio: www.diabetes.co.uk/waist-to-hip-ratio-calculator.html.

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Where do I start with managing menopause weight gain?

Managing weight takes a degree of effort and focus, and it can be easier to address when other menopause symptoms are under control. Symptoms such as insomnia, low mood and aching joints all make weight management more challenging – both physically and emotionally.

Ideally any regime to manage weight needs to be one you can carry forward into the decades ahead. It needs to be healthy, sustainable and something that becomes a lifestyle rather than a quick fix, short-term solution.

Fad diets often lead to the classic yo-yo diet effect of rapid weight loss, followed by more weight gain. They can be challenging, difficult to maintain and ultimately they may make it more difficult to control weight in the long-term.

The body needs good nutrition to help maintain general health, and during menopause bone and heart health are of particular focus. Diets which advise severe calorie restriction (below 1200 Kcals/day), long periods without eating (fasting diets), or the avoidance of specific foods or food groups (low carbohydrate diets) are not recommended.

Where do I start with menopause weight management?

An effective weight loss eating plan needs a daily calorie deficit of 300-500 Kcals. This needs to be combined with a mixture of aerobic and resistance or strength-based exercise and movement.

However, before implementing any change, keep a food and activity diary for a few days to help identify where calorie savings can be made. Eat and move normally on the days you record the food diary. It needs to be as representative of normal habits as possible.

When you measure exercise and movement look at things that are easy to calculate, such as the number of steps you take in a day (most smartphones have a daily step counter), or if you already take part in more structured exercise classes or go to the gym, note how frequently you go and duration of classes.

How do I identify a calorie deficit?

Rather than setting a specific number of calories each day, look at the way you eat and drink now, and then look for the most efficient ways to reduce calorie intake by 300-500 Kcals per day. Some of the most common ways to save excess calories are to:

- Reduce unplanned snacking and grazing
- Reduce alcohol consumption
- Reduce portion sizes
- Reduce eating through boredom or feeling low

Larger portion sizes are a very common contributory element to excess calories, as are long gaps without eating, which often leads to larger portions at meal times.

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How do I start?

Getting started doesn't have to be overwhelming. Introduce small and steady changes, and then add in more as you become more confident:

- Establish a regular eating pattern
- Plan meals for the day, including mid-morning and mid-afternoon snacks
- Eat slowly until you are satisfied and not stuffed
- Try a modest first helping at meals: eat this slowly, see if you are still hungry and then go for more if you need it
- If you are out for the day, take food with you

Should I avoid alcohol?

Women between 40-60 years are one of the fastest growing groups of excessive drinkers in the UK, but knowing your units will help you stay in control of drinking. To keep health risks low from alcohol, women are advised not to drink more than 14 units of alcohol per week, which is equivalent to 10 small glasses of lower-strength wine.

From a weight management perspective, alcohol contains almost as many calories as fat. When you drink alcohol you are more likely to graze and look for salty or sweet snacks.

How do I control emotional triggers?

Emotional eating is very common, not least if you're not feeling yourself. It's one of the reasons to get other menopause symptoms under control before taking steps to manage weight.

There are many techniques that can help overcome emotional eating, including Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), meditation, reframing your thinking, tapping, breathing exercises and simple distraction. If emotional eating is a challenge for you, it might be very helpful to explore one of the suggestions above.

Planning your meals and snacks can also help you stay focused and organised.

How can I move smarter?

To make a difference and to support your weight management goals you need to increase activity levels consistently. It's more beneficial to do a little more activity most days than overdoing it one day a week. For example, if your step count is around 3,000 steps each day, aim to increase that to 5,000. There's no need to jump into strenuous exercise. Just increase what you already do, increase it moderately and increase it most days.

If walking is difficult, consider swimming (non-weight bearing), cycling, or any activity which increases your breathing rate (but allows you to talk) and makes you feel a little warmer.

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Why do I need to build strength?

Part of the problem causing menopause weight gain is a decline in muscle. Performing regular, but gentle, strength exercise will help build new muscle and begin to increase metabolic rate. Changes to diet will also be much more beneficial alongside regular strength exercise.

Good strength exercise can include body weights, simple exercises with weights such as squats or bicep curls, and resistance bands. Contrary to popular myth, it's not all about pumping iron at the gym.

This is also a very good time to introduce a little restorative exercise into your routine. Yoga, Pilates and simple breathing exercises and stretching are all beneficial.

Don't feel overwhelmed by the thought of these different styles of exercise. Start with one thing and then gradually introduce other types of exercise to compliment each other.

It's a good idea to consult your healthcare professional before embarking on a new exercise regime.

How do I measure success?

There is much more than simple weight loss to be gained from eating well and moving more, and a range of different methods can be used to measure success:

- Try not to weigh yourself more than once a week. Use the same scales on the same day at roughly the same time each week.
- Identify some clothes that are on the snug side. Set a date in a few weeks to see how much better they fit.
- Use a tape measure to record bust, waist and hip measurements. It's likely you may change shape before significant results on the scales, especially if introducing more strength exercise.
- Record how much energy you have, how confident and optimistic you feel when you are changing your lifestyle.

What if I slip up?

Everyone makes mistakes, and slip ups are to be expected when trying to change long established aspects of lifestyle. It's not about perfection, it's about being a bit better, and if you are consistent results will come.

If you make a mistake, try to work out why. Learning from mistakes is one of the most important things you can do when striving to make a permanent change to your lifestyle.

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Useful contacts

British Dietetic Association
www.bda.uk.com

Diabetes UK | Waist to Hip Ratio Calculator
www.diabetes.co.uk

NHS UK | Alcohol Advice
www.nhs.uk/live-well/alcohol-advice/calculating-alcohol-units/

WHC Fact Sheet | Osteoporosis: bone health following the menopause
WHC Fact Sheet | Coronary heart disease
WHC Fact Sheet | Exercise in menopause
WHC Fact Sheet | Nutrition in menopause
www.womens-health-concern.org/help-and-advice/factsheets/

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This Women's Health Concern fact sheet provides information and guidance, to be used in consultation with your own healthcare professional. It has been reviewed by the medical advisory council of the British Menopause Society and it will be updated when guidance changes and/or new data becomes available.

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