

Nine tips for handling midlife weight woes.

By Evelyn Tribole, R.D., from Lifetimetv.com

We women are like fine wines: We just get better with age. Save for one little detail: our weight -- which seems fated to skyrocket once we hit that developmental milestone, menopause. According to the North American Association for the Study of Obesity, obesity in women has nearly doubled in the past two decades; it is a problem that researchers say is particularly acute during perimenopause, the three- to 10-year period preceding menopause. The Women's Healthy Lifestyle Project, a five-year study of 585 perimenopausal women funded by the National Institutes of Health, found that women who don't change their lifestyles gain an average of 5.2 pounds during that period.

But before you throw in the towel and submit to age-related weight gain, consider this: Understanding the new set of rules governing your body's changes can provide you with concrete ways to manage your weight. Here's what is happening: As you age, your body stops ovulating and produces less and less estrogen. Meanwhile, the hormone testosterone (no, it's not just in men) remains at the same level. This increased testosterone-to-estrogen ratio triggers the expansion of our waistlines, since our fat distribution changes to be more like a man's, shifting from our hips and buttocks to our waists. (One bright note: Once this transition is completed, half of all women find that their thighs have actually decreased in size!)

As your waistline fills out, some weight gain is inevitable, although the amount can range from two to 20 pounds. However, another key finding of the Women's Healthy Lifestyle Project was that women who engage in physical activity and adhere to a low-fat, reduced-calorie diet are very likely to either maintain their weight or lose weight. The bottom line: Your hormones don't have to have the last word -- you can keep off the weight. Here are nine tactics for staying fit during perimenopause:

1. Pump some iron. Lean body mass, which acts as a calorie-burning machine, naturally decreases as you age. Lifting weights two to three times a week can help you maintain your muscle mass and keep your metabolism revved.
2. Exercise your options. Your metabolism slows down 10% to 15% during midlife, mainly due to decreased muscle mass. Aerobic, cardiovascular exercise is crucial to minimizing the weight gain and fat storage that would naturally result from this downshift. Walk, jog, bike, swim or do an aerobics tape for at least one hour a day most days of the week.

3. Eat right. Dieting -- defined as traditional low-calorie plans, so-called fat-burning pills and fad diets, including Atkins -- can actually worsen midlife weight gain. That's because dieting increases the level of enzymes that tell your body to store fat. To effectively manage your weight through food, craft a balanced diet of nutrient-rich foods and eat only when you are hungry.
4. Cut quantities. As we age, our bodies need fewer calories. If you downsize the amount you eat at each meal, but increase the number of meals you have each day, you'll find that you have more energy and a more balanced mood. Aim to consume five or six small meals each day, eating no more than three fistfuls of food each time.
5. Seek satisfaction. With less estrogen in your body, it's easier to overeat, since estrogen helps trigger the feeling of being full. However, eating high-satiety (aka filling) foods, including those high in protein (such as chicken, turkey, eggs, fish, beans, tofu, nuts) and those high in fibre (such as whole-grain cereals, dried beans, whole-grain crackers, fruits, vegetables), help you feel satisfied and stop you from overeating.
6. Love lunch. It's a somewhat controversial concept, but some experts recommend eating your biggest meal at lunch rather than dinner to control weight gain.
7. Limit alcohol. Since alcohol has been shown to increase abdominal weight gain, do not have more than one drink per day.
8. Relax! Periods of stress cause increased storage of fat around the abdomen -- and years of stress can actually disrupt your fat cells' ability to make estrogen, causing them to expand in an effort to compensate. The best thing you can do is not get too worked up about impending weight gain (or anything else!) and find ways to release stress -- through exercise, meditation, journal-writing, therapy or conversations with friends.
9. Look on the bright side! There is some good news: Once you've completed the "change of life," your fat cells start to shrink and produce less fat. While you will never have the metabolism you had when you were 20, your weight will get somewhat easier to manage after perimenopause.