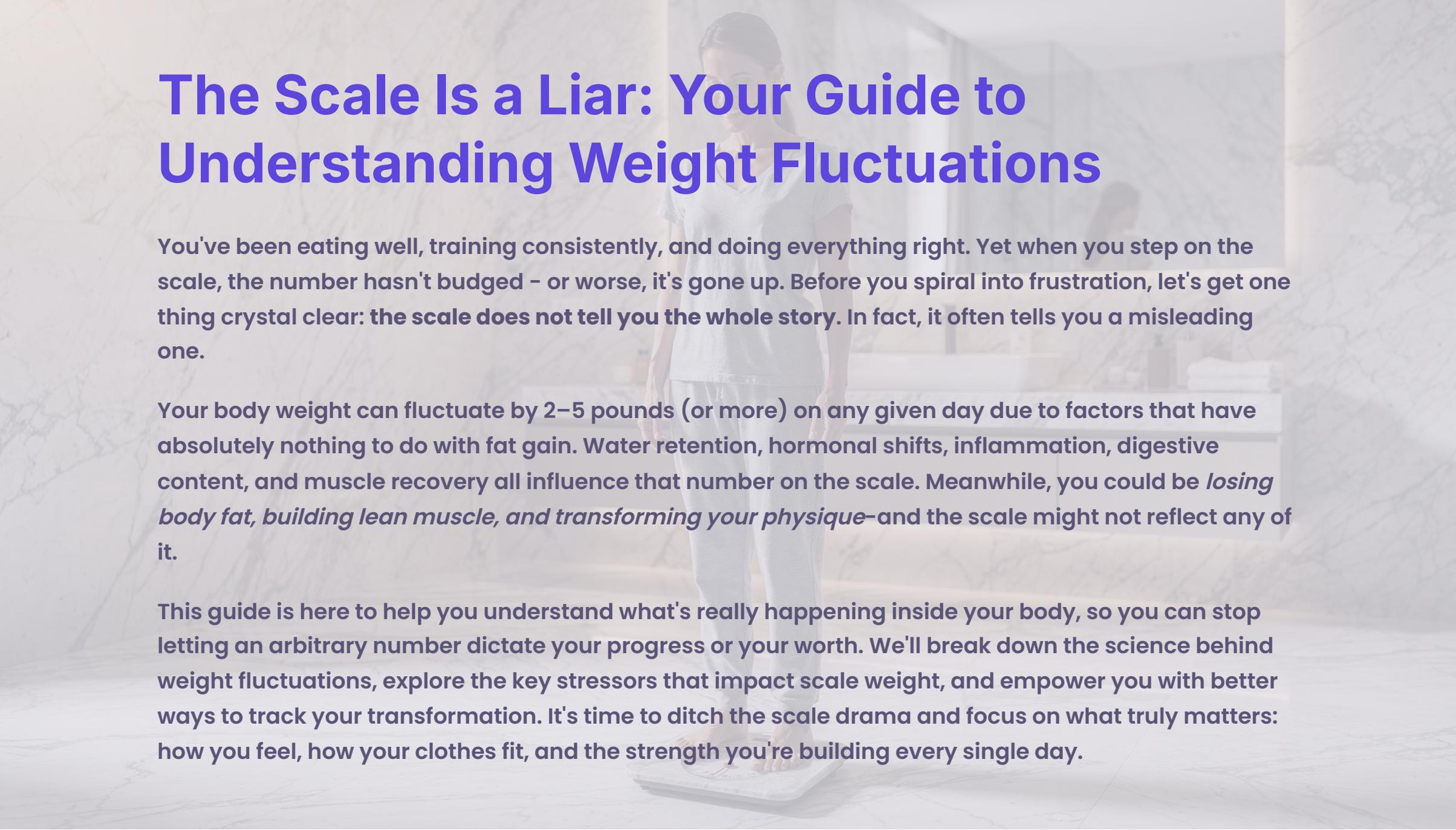


# The Scale Is a Liar: Your Guide to Understanding Weight Fluctuations

A woman in a white t-shirt and grey leggings stands on a white scale in a gym. The background is a blurred gym environment with a person in the distance.

You've been eating well, training consistently, and doing everything right. Yet when you step on the scale, the number hasn't budged - or worse, it's gone up. Before you spiral into frustration, let's get one thing crystal clear: **the scale does not tell you the whole story.** In fact, it often tells you a misleading one.

Your body weight can fluctuate by 2–5 pounds (or more) on any given day due to factors that have absolutely nothing to do with fat gain. Water retention, hormonal shifts, inflammation, digestive content, and muscle recovery all influence that number on the scale. Meanwhile, you could be *losing body fat, building lean muscle, and transforming your physique*—and the scale might not reflect any of it.

This guide is here to help you understand what's really happening inside your body, so you can stop letting an arbitrary number dictate your progress or your worth. We'll break down the science behind weight fluctuations, explore the key stressors that impact scale weight, and empower you with better ways to track your transformation. It's time to ditch the scale drama and focus on what truly matters: how you feel, how your clothes fit, and the strength you're building every single day.

# Stress, Cortisol, and Water Retention:

Here's the foundation you need to understand: when your body experiences stress:

- Physical,
- Mental,
- Emotional,

It releases a hormone called **cortisol**. Cortisol is often called the "stress hormone," and whilst it serves important functions (like helping you respond to danger), chronically elevated cortisol has a sneaky side effect: **it makes your body hold onto water.**

Why? Cortisol triggers your kidneys to retain sodium, and where sodium goes, water follows. This means that even if you're in a calorie deficit and burning fat, your body might be masking that progress by holding onto several pounds of water. The result? The scale stays put or even climbs higher, despite the fact that you're actually getting leaner.

This water retention isn't "real" weight gain—it's temporary, and it has nothing to do with your body fat percentage. But it's incredibly frustrating when you don't know what's happening. The key is recognising the stressors in your life that spike cortisol and course correcting to reduce that stress.

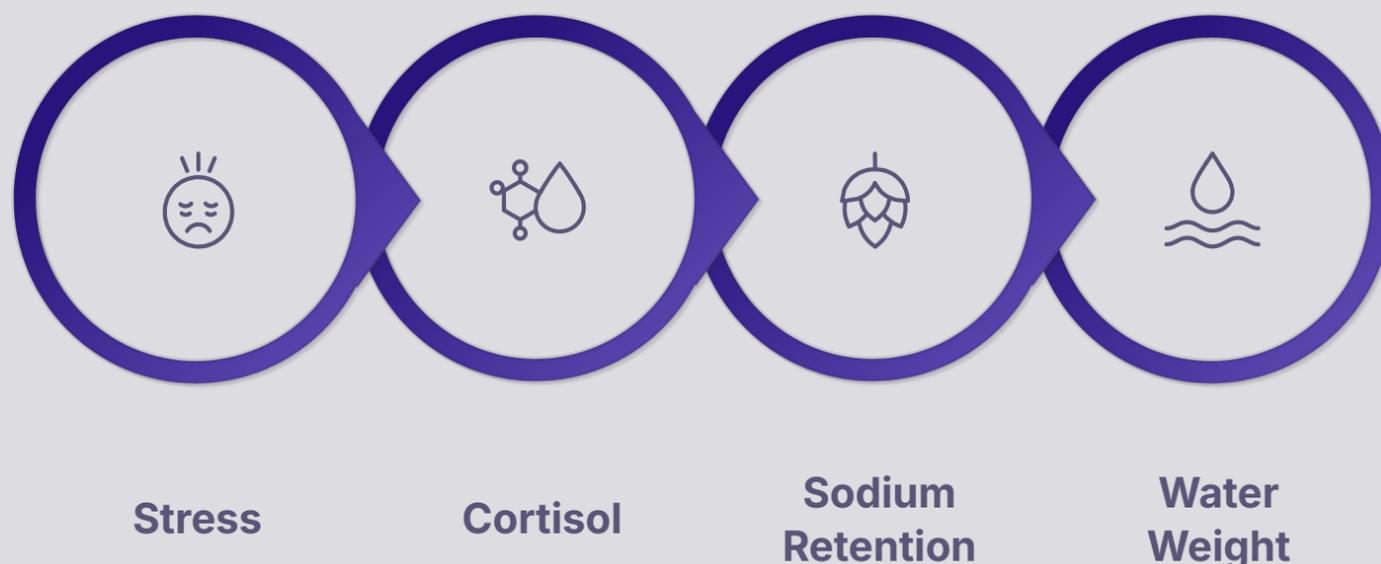
## Quick Science Summary

**Stress → Cortisol Release → Sodium Retention → Water Weight**

This is a normal physiological response. Your body isn't broken—it's just doing what it's designed to do under stress.

### Think about it like this:

Your body is under stress & it's giving you more cushioning/bubble wrap for protection.



# The Menstrual Cycle:

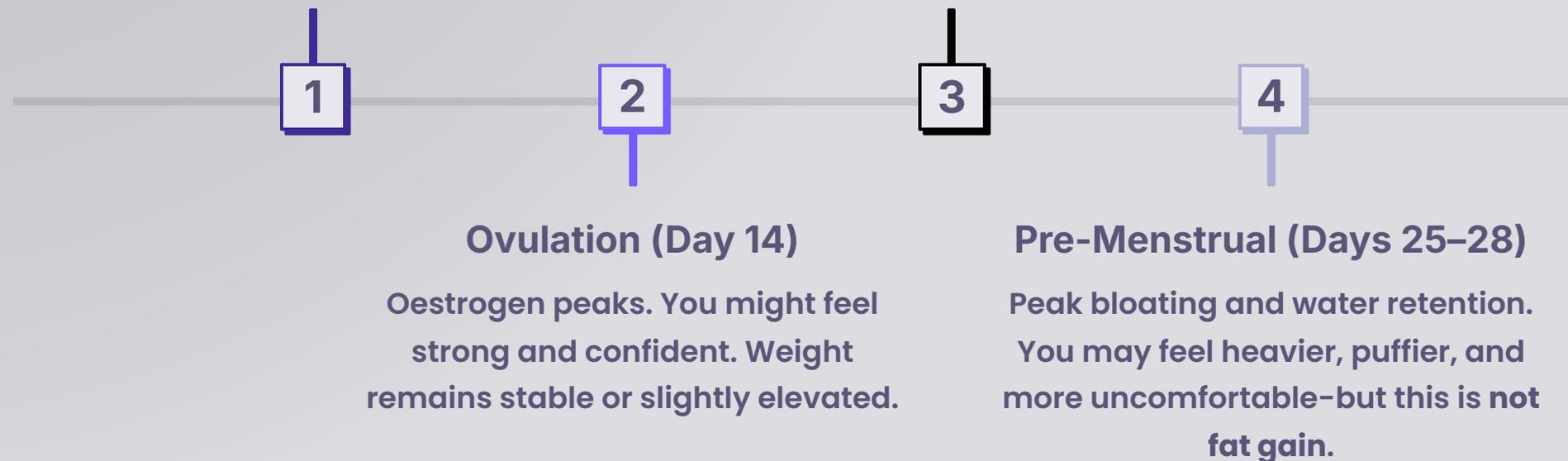
If you've ever noticed your weight creeping up in the week before your period, you're not imagining things. **Hormonal fluctuations throughout your menstrual cycle** can cause significant water retention, bloating, and scale fluctuations—often between 3 to 7 pounds.

## Follicular Phase (Days 1–14)

Oestrogen rises, energy increases, and you typically feel lighter and leaner. The scale tends to be at its lowest during this phase.

## Luteal Phase (Days 15–28)

Progesterone surges, which can increase appetite, cravings, and water retention. This is when the scale often climbs.



Understanding your cycle empowers you to anticipate these fluctuations rather than panic about them. If you weigh yourself during the luteal phase, expect the number to be higher. If you weigh yourself during the follicular phase, expect it to drop. Neither number is more "true" than the other—they're just snapshots of where you are hormonally.

Track your cycle alongside your weight, and you'll start to see clear patterns that remove the emotional charge from the scale.

# Sleep, or lack of:

Poor sleep is one of the fastest ways to spike cortisol and mess with your scale weight. When you don't get enough quality sleep - or when your sleep is fragmented - your body interprets this as stress. Cortisol rises, and with it comes water retention, increased hunger hormones (ghrelin), and decreased satiety hormones (leptin).

Even a single night of poor sleep can cause a 1-3 pound increase on the scale the next day. Chronic sleep deprivation compounds this effect, making it nearly impossible to assess true progress.

Your body also struggles to recover from workouts without adequate sleep, leading to prolonged inflammation and—you guessed it—*more water retention*.



## Aim for 7-9 Hours

Prioritise consistent sleep and wake times to regulate cortisol and support recovery.



## Cool, Dark Room

Optimise your sleep environment to improve sleep quality and depth.



## Limit Screen Time

Reduce blue light exposure at least 1 hour before bed to support melatonin production.

If you've had a rough night's sleep and the scale is up, don't freak out. Give your body a few days of solid rest, and you'll likely see that "weight gain" disappear as quickly as it arrived. Sleep is a non-negotiable pillar of progress—treat it as such.

# Mental and Emotional Stress:

Your body doesn't distinguish between physical and psychological stress. Whether you're running from a lion or dealing with a demanding boss, work deadlines, relationship conflict, or financial worries, your body responds the same way: it releases cortisol. And as we've established, cortisol equals water retention.

This is why you might notice the scale creeping up during particularly stressful weeks, even when your nutrition and training are dialled in. Your body is in survival mode, holding onto resources (including water) because it perceives a threat. This is a completely normal response—but it can be maddening when you're trying to track progress.

## Recognise the Signs

Tight jaw, shallow breathing, poor digestion, disrupted sleep—these are all indicators that stress is impacting your body.

## Manage Your Stress

Incorporate daily stress-reduction practices: meditation, journaling, walks in nature, breathwork, or therapy.

## Give Yourself Grace

The scale is not an accurate reflection of your efforts during high-stress periods. Trust the process and focus on self-care.

The bottom line: if life is chaotic, the scale will lie to you. Don't let it derail your progress or your mindset. Focus on managing stress where you can, and remember that once the storm passes, your body will release that excess water and reveal the progress you've been making all along.



This client appeared to have gained 2kg in 8 days, however, she had an extremely busy week at work, juggling parenting and poor sleep. We could identify from her comparison photos clear evidence of fat loss still occurring around her waist and abdomen.

Once work calmed, she de-stressed and her weight soon dropped back past 90kg.

# Illness, Injury, Inflammation, and Immune Response

When your body is fighting off an illness, recovering from an injury, or dealing with inflammation, your immune system kicks into overdrive. This immune response triggers a cascade of physiological changes, including – surprise – increased water retention and temporary weight gain.



Inflammation is your body's natural defence mechanism. When you're sick or injured, your body sends white blood cells and fluid to the affected area to promote healing. This fluid accumulation shows up on the scale as "weight gain," but it's not fat – it's your body doing exactly what it needs to do to repair itself.

Even mild inflammation from overtraining, poor gut health, or chronic stress can cause the scale to climb. Your body prioritises healing over everything else, which means fat loss takes a back seat whilst your immune system does its job.



## Common Culprits of Inflammation

Colds, flu, infections, allergies, autoimmune flare-ups, digestive issues, overtraining, and chronic stress.



## What Happens to the Scale

You may gain 2–5 pounds seemingly overnight, even if your nutrition hasn't changed. This is fluid, not fat.



## How to Respond

Rest, hydrate, nourish your body, and *do not* restrict calories. Healing requires energy. The scale will normalise once you've recovered.

If you've been ill or injured and the scale has climbed, this is not the time to panic or cut calories. Your body needs resources to heal. Trust that the weight will come off naturally once your immune system has done its job. Pushing through with intense training or restricting food will only prolong inflammation and delay your recovery.

# High Carbohydrate and Salt Intake:

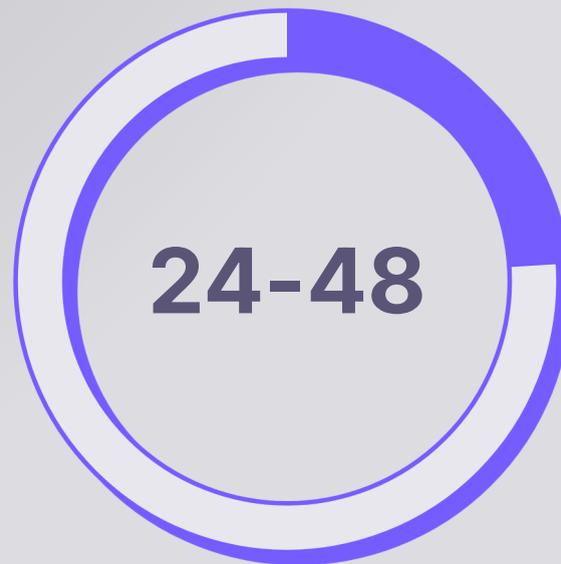
Let's clear something up: **carbohydrates do not make you fat**. However, they do cause temporary water retention, which can make the scale jump dramatically. Here's why: for every gramme of carbohydrate stored in your muscles as glycogen, your body holds onto approximately 3–4 grams of water. So if you eat a carb-heavy meal after a period of lower carb intake, your muscles will "refill" with glycogen and water – and the scale will reflect this.

Similarly, sodium (salt) causes your body to retain water to maintain electrolyte balance. A salty meal – think restaurant food, takeaway, or processed snacks – can easily add 2–4 pounds of water weight overnight. This is **not fat gain**. It's simply your body holding onto extra fluid temporarily whilst it processes the sodium.



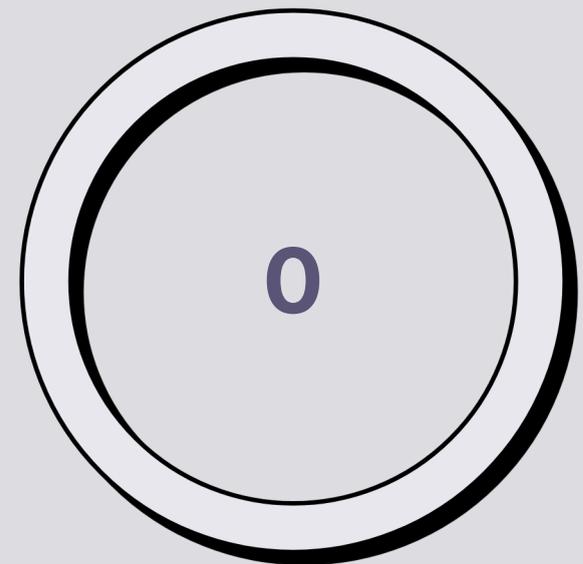
**Pounds of Water Weight**

From a single high-carb or high-sodium meal



**Hours to Normalise**

Time it takes for water weight to drop after a salty or carb-heavy meal



**Actual Fat Gained**

Unless you ate thousands of calories over maintenance, this is just water

If you've enjoyed a higher-carb or saltier meal and the scale has jumped, don't panic. Drink plenty of water (yes, drinking more water helps flush out excess sodium), stay consistent with your routine, and give it 1–2 days. The scale will settle back down. This is a normal physiological response, not a setback.

# Workout Recovery:

You trained hard, crushed leg day, and woke up feeling accomplished. Then you stepped on the scale and saw it had gone *up* by 2–3 pounds. What gives? Welcome to the world of **exercise-induced inflammation and muscle recovery**.

When you lift weights – especially during intense sessions like leg day or hypertrophy training – you create micro-tears in your muscle fibres. This is a good thing; it's how muscles grow stronger. But in order to repair those fibres, your body sends fluid, nutrients, and immune cells to the affected areas. This acute inflammation is part of the healing process, and it shows up on the scale as temporary weight gain.



## You Train Hard

Especially lower body or high-volume sessions that create significant muscle damage



## Inflammation Increases

Your body sends fluid to muscles to aid repair and reduce damage



## Scale Goes Up

Water retention makes you temporarily "heavier" even though you're building muscle and burning fat



## Recovery Happens

After 2–5 days, inflammation subsides, water weight drops, and scale normalises

This is especially common after leg day, as your lower body contains the largest muscle groups in your body. The bigger the muscle, the more inflammation and water retention during recovery. If you're training consistently and pushing yourself in the gym, expect the scale to fluctuate regularly – it's a sign that your body is adapting and getting stronger, not that you're gaining fat.

**Pro tip:** avoid weighing yourself in the 48 hours following an intense training session. Wait until your muscles have recovered, and you'll get a more accurate reading of your true progress.

# Perimenopause and Menopause

For women in their 30s, 40s, and 50s, **hormonal changes** add another layer of complexity to scale fluctuations. As oestrogen and progesterone levels begin to shift – whether due to natural ageing, perimenopause, or menopause – your body's relationship with water, fat storage, and metabolism changes too.

During perimenopause, oestrogen levels fluctuate wildly before eventually declining. This can cause unpredictable water retention, increased belly fat storage, disrupted sleep, mood swings, and weight fluctuations that seem to have no rhyme or reason. You might do everything "right" and still see the scale climb due to hormonal chaos.

Post-menopause, lower oestrogen levels can lead to increased cortisol sensitivity, making your body more prone to stress-related water retention. Additionally, changes in muscle mass and metabolism mean that the scale becomes an even less reliable indicator of health and progress.



## Expect Fluctuations

Your weight may vary by 5–10 pounds throughout the month due to hormonal shifts. This is normal.



## Prioritise Strength Training

Building and maintaining muscle becomes even more critical during this life stage to support metabolism.



## Focus on How You Feel

Energy, strength, sleep quality, and mood are far better indicators of health than the scale.

If you're navigating perimenopause or menopause, the scale is going to be particularly unreliable. Hormone replacement therapy (HRT), stress management, strength training, and adequate protein intake can all help stabilise symptoms—but the number on the scale is not the metric to focus on. Your body is changing, and that's okay. What matters is how you feel, how strong you are, and how well you're taking care of yourself during this transition.

# The Better Way to Track Progress: Measurements, Photos, and How You Feel

Here's the truth: the scale is just one data point, and it's often the least accurate one. If you want to truly understand your progress, you need to look at the bigger picture. Body measurements, progress photos, strength gains, energy levels, and how your clothes fit are all *far more reliable* indicators of fat loss and body composition changes than the number on the scale.



## Body Measurements

Track your waist, hips, thighs, and arms every 2–4 weeks. You can lose inches whilst the scale stays the same—or even goes up if you're building muscle.

# 2-5

### Pounds of Daily Fluctuation

Normal weight variance due to water, digestion, and hormones



## Progress Photos

Take photos in the same lighting, same pose, same time of day every 2–4 weeks. Visual changes often appear before the scale budges.

# 100%

### More Accurate

Progress photos and measurements compared to scale weight alone



## How Clothes Fit

Are your jeans looser? Does your shirt fit better across the shoulders? Fit is a powerful, tangible indicator of body composition changes.

# 0

### Your Worth

The scale does not define your value, progress, or success

If you must weigh yourself, do it under consistent conditions: same time of day, same day of the week, after using the toilet, before eating or drinking. But even then, take the number with a massive pinch of salt. Your body is not a static object—it's a dynamic, living system influenced by dozens of variables every single day.

The real question isn't "What does the scale say?" It's "How do I feel? Am I getting stronger? Do I have more energy? Are my clothes fitting better?" Those are the metrics that matter.

Weigh daily if you are prepared and comfortable with seeing daily fluctuations.

Weigh weekly if you are less confident and looking to see trends over time.