

MENOPAUSE WEIGHT GAIN: MYTH OR REALITY?

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We often assume that menopause (12 months after a woman's last menses) is the real culprit in weight gain and that there is really nothing you can do about it. Is this true?

According to the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, 51.7% of women 20-39 years old were overweight and 68.1% of women 40-59 years old were overweight. So, it seems that the hormonal changes of menopause could be the culprit. The reality is that these hormonal changes might make you more likely to gain weight around your abdomen than around your hips and thighs. But hormonal changes alone don't necessarily cause menopause weight gain. This weight gain is usually related to aging, as well as lifestyle and genetics. Newer research even points to a shift in gut bacteria related to plummeting estrogen levels. Let's explore some of these factors and also how we may be able to modify the outcome.

Muscle mass typically diminishes with age (sarcopenia), while fat mass increases. When we lose muscle mass, our body's metabolism (or rate at which we use calories) slows down. So, if we continue to eat as if we are 20 years old and don't increase your physical activity, you are likely to gain weight. Sarcopenia can actually start in our later 30s and continues so that by age 80 we have about half the muscle mass we had as young adults. *Why?* Muscle mass is a high-maintenance tissue that requires a lot of energy. In contrast, fat stores energy, and our bodies love to store energy as a survival mechanism. Also, if we are not exercising and not using muscle, our bodies cannot justify providing energy to keep it intact. When we refer to "exercise", ladies, I am not talking about taking a walk around the block. Instead, we are referring to actually picking up some weights. We now know that if we stimulate our muscles with resistance exercises, we are telling our

bodies that muscles are important and we need to use energy (calories) to maintain them.

It is thought that estrogen influences how excess body fat is stored. In younger women, fat storage is emphasized in the lower body – hips, thighs and buttocks. It is thought that later in life, estrogen is reduced with menopause and testosterone may become more prevalent. This causes an increase in abdominal fat and transitions a woman's body from a "pear-shape" to an "apple-shape". There is also a corresponding increase in deep abdominal or visceral fat, which is located beneath the abdominal muscles. In younger women, fat is deposited directly below the skin, this is known as subcutaneous fat. Increasing visceral fat, unfortunately, is tied to insulin resistance, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure and breast and colon cancer. This is exactly the reason we use InBody body composition analysis to help us monitor and reduce visceral fat.

Another theory about weight gain after 40 is related to an overgrowth of "bad bacteria"

in the gut. Basically, Bacteroidetes are generally considered to be "good bacteria", while Firmicutes are the "bad bacteria". As long as the ratio of Firmicutes to Bacteroidetes (F/B) maintains homeostasis, then our metabolism, fat storage and hormones also maintain homeostasis. It has been observed in obese individuals or those with inflammatory bowel disease, that their F/B ratio is either increased or decreased. An overgrowth of "bad bacteria" also causes the body to store more calories than it consumes, resulting in an increase in body fat. The bottom line here is that we can eliminate foods and calories from our diet without any corresponding weight loss. Healing the "leaky gut" or intestinal permeability has to happen first.

What to do?

1. Exercise/move more.

Include 2-3 sessions of strength in your weekly regimen. If you're not sure how to do this, enlist the help of a qualified personal trainer.

2. Create a slight caloric deficit on a daily basis.

Even a deficit of 100-200 calories a day will be significant on a weekly basis.

3. Check your sugar intake.

Added sugars can account for an extra 300 calories per day. This can innocently come from sugar-sweetened drinks such as juices, sodas, energy drinks, flavored waters and sweetened coffee drinks.

4. Limit alcohol.

Americans are now drinking more than ever. According to the CDC, 20% of U.S. adults are now binge drinking. For us women that is 3+ drinks in a 2-hour period. For men, it equates to 4+ drinks in the same time period. Women metabolize alcohol less efficiently than men because we have slower rates of detoxification and lower volumes of total body water. Beer, wine and bourbon are all phytoestrogens that can raise a female's estrogen load, regardless of her age, putting her at risk for estrogen-sensitive conditions like endometrial cancer, breast cancer, diabetes, fibroids and endometriosis.

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