

Menopause and Weight Gain

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Menopause doesn't cause you to gain weight. But because extra pounds can creep on as women age, a spare tire around the middle has often been dubbed the "meno-pot" or "meno-pudge."

Don't ditch your skinny jeans, though -- here's the truth about this "middle-age spread" and what you can do about it.

Why It Happens

Women tend to have more fat during middle age than men do. Even if you don't add pounds, you may find that clothes don't fit because the waist is too tight. What gives?

Doctors think several things can work together to explain why weight gain can strike around this time:

- We burn fat more slowly as we age. All bodies slow down over time.
- Many women exercise less in their 40s, 50s, and 60s. Busy lives and lapsed gym cards mean less muscle and more fat.
- Falling hormone levels, plus your genes, cause your body to store fat in new places after menopause. You may have once had more padding at the hips. Now there's more at the waist. This can shift your shape from pear-like (wider at hips and thighs) to apple-like (wider at waist and belly).

What doesn't add pounds? Hormone levels. There's no proof that menopause hormone therapy can correct the weight gain. But regular exercise -- even something as simple as walking -- can help many symptoms of menopause.

Why You Want to Avoid 'Meno-Pot'

Whatever the cause, more menopausal women in the U.S. are overweight than at their normal weight. Those extra pounds come with added health concerns, too.

Belly fat is linked to heart problems, stroke, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, arthritis, and breast and colon cancer.

Even when body mass index (BMI -- a measure of body fat based on height and weight) is normal, a large waist (35 inches or more for women) along with other risks is linked to more chances of getting diabetes in women.



How to Keep the 'Meno-Pot' at Bay

Excess weight responds well to some effort. Here's what helps:

Eat a bit less. Pounds gained now may be more likely to go right to your middle. Since your goal should be to lessen weight gain overall, eating just 200 fewer calories a day in your 50s can help.

Eat healthier. Food choices make a big change. In a study, women lost weight at menopause by eating a diet with more nutrients and fewer calories. They ditched sugary drinks, fried foods, meats, cheese, and desserts for fish, fruits, and vegetables.

Maintain muscle. Regular exercise helps boost your metabolism and burns off what you eat, and helps your body shed fat faster overall. Keeping active adds muscle mass, which also helps prevent weight gain. Walking, jogging, and strength training also help you shed pounds.

Manage your menopause symptoms. Hot flashes and poor sleep can raise your stress levels. Stress packs on pounds. Exercise can help. Ask your doctor what else might work for you.

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