

Menopause and weight

Many women think weight gain is part of menopause, but it's more likely due to ageing and associated lifestyle changes. Weight gain and increased abdominal (belly) fat is common among women at midlife. But there are things you can do to lose weight if needed.

What causes weight gain in midlife?

On average, women between the ages of 45 and 55 gain about half a kilo per year. Many things can contribute to weight gain in midlife.

Ageing

Ageing causes a decrease in muscle mass and an increase in fat, which slows down your metabolism. So, if your diet stays the same, you are likely to gain weight.

Menopausal symptoms

Menopausal symptoms can make it hard to focus on achieving a healthy weight. Disturbed sleep, mood fluctuations and hot flushes can lead to reduced physical activity and poor food choices, which can cause weight gain.

Changing hormones

Menopause doesn't cause weight gain, but studies show that changing hormones, such as reduced oestrogen, might mean you carry more weight around your abdomen rather than your hips and thighs.

In postmenopausal women, abdominal fat accounts for 15% to 20% of total body fat, compared with 5% to 8% before menopause.



Risks of abdominal fat

It's not healthy to carry too much weight, but weight around your abdomen has more significant health risks. Fat stored in this part of your body is also known as 'visceral fat'.

Excess visceral fat is linked to:

- an increased risk of heart disease (one of the leading causes of death in women in Australia)
- type 2 diabetes
- breast cancer
- dementia.

Increased belly fat also increases menopausal symptoms, such as hot flushes.

What you can do

Achieving and maintaining a healthy weight during the menopause transition is very important. There are many things you can do to reduce weight gain and the associated risk of chronic disease. If you need to lose weight, aim for an initial goal of 5% to 7% of your body weight, as this has many health benefits.

Eat a healthy diet

Eating a healthy diet will improve your energy levels, keep your blood glucose stable and help to maintain a healthy weight. A low-calorie or low-carb diet can help you to lose weight. This is especially the case if you have high blood pressure, high cholesterol or type 2 diabetes. Talk to your doctor or see a dietitian for specific advice.

Do regular physical activity

Physical activity can reduce the risk of chronic disease, falls and osteoporosis. It can also help you manage your weight and menopausal symptoms.

If you want to lose weight, you will need to combine regular physical activity with reduced calorie intake.

It's recommended you are active on most (preferably all) days of the week. Weekly exercise recommendations include:

- 2.5 to 5 hours of moderate intensity physical activity (e.g. brisk walking, golf, mowing, swimming)

or

- 1.25 to 2.5 hours of vigorous intensity physical activity (e.g. jogging, aerobics, fast cycling, playing team sports).

Or you can do a combination of the above.

Muscle-strengthening activities are also recommended two days a week. These can include body-weight exercises like push-ups, pull-ups, squats or lunges, weightlifting or household activities that involve lifting, carrying or digging.

Prioritise sleep

Sleep disruption is associated with eating more food and making poorer food choices. It's recommended you aim for at least seven hours of sleep each night.

Limit alcohol

Drinking too much alcohol can cause weight gain, interfere with your sleep and make menopausal symptoms worse (e.g. hot flushes and night sweats).

When to see your doctor

Talk to your doctor if your symptoms affect your daily life.

For example, if:

- you are overweight and find it hard to lose weight
- you have problems sleeping
- you experience strong emotions, anxiety or depression
- you need help to limit alcohol.

For more information, visit

www.jeanhailes.org.au/health-a-z/menopause

Updated August 2022

This fact sheet is designed to be informative and educational. It is not intended to provide specific medical advice or replace advice from your medical practitioner.

Jean Hailes for Women's Health gratefully acknowledges the support of the Australian Government.

© Jean Hailes for Women's Health 2022

Jean Hailes takes a broad and inclusive approach to the topic of women's health. The terms 'women' and 'girls' are used throughout this resource to refer to all women, girls, and gender-diverse people.



Phone 03 9453 8999
jeanhailes.org.au