

Doctors advise middle-age women: Focus on health, not shape, of body

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Alas, you ladies at midlife.

You try on that swimsuit in anticipation of summer. You look in the mirror. Something is disturbingly different. Like your waist seems to be disappearing.

Brace yourselves: Once we cross the threshold into middle age, women in general have a harder time losing weight.

"Girlfriend, there is no one who's going to avoid this - not a single person," says physician Pamela Peeke, author of "Fight Fat After 40" (Viking Press, \$14) and a medical adviser to the National Women's Health Resource Center in Red Bank, N.J.

"It's normal. N-O-R-M-A-L. Now get over it."

Peeke is blunt but merciful. She dangles a carrot by saying you can do some major damage control to keep that waistline from ever expanding.

"Optimize your physical fitness and excellent nutrition and stress management and you will minimize the weight gain," she says.

All right, it's not the silver bullet you were hoping for. But let's face it, says Joann Pinkerton, an OB-GYN and director of the Midlife Health Center at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville: "There is no magic cure. There is no magic pill."

But it should help to understand why weight is more difficult to keep off at this stage of life so you can figure out how to best minimize the impact.

Medical experts say most women gain an average of 10 pounds around menopause, but midlife weight gain isn't inevitable for every woman. Joseph Ramieri, chairman of obstetrics, gynecology and women's health for Morristown (N.J.) Memorial and Overlook hospitals, says he has been seeing some patients for 30 years who have maintained the 115- to 120-pound weight range they had when they were 20.

"They have a lifestyle where their eating is regulated or their willpower is such that they're . . . intelligent enough to maintain the caloric intake," he says. "And as soon as they gain 2 pounds, they diet for a few days."

Metabolism drops

as we age

Kenneth Storch, internist and head of medical nutrition at Overlook Hospital in Summit, N.J., says midlife weight gain isn't inevitable for those women who regularly engage in "good eating and good exercise."

"There's probably a combination of factors that all work together to induce weight gain in many women at midlife. Sort of like a 'perfect storm,'" says physician Nanette Santoro, professor and director of the Division of Reproductive Endocrinology at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx.

A major one has to do with the aging process. Santoro says there's a natural drop in the metabolic rate of women in their mid-40s. Our metabolic rate dips after age 18 by about 2 percent per decade, according to Lorilee Schoenbeck and her fellow co-authors of "Menopause: Bridging the Gap Between Natural and Conventional Medicine" (Kensington Publishing Corp., \$14).

"What that means," Santoro says, "is that a woman who continues to have exactly the same [food] intake and exercise habits at age 45 as she did at age 35 will gain weight. So she must either decrease her intake or increase her activity to maintain her weight at the same level."

There are also changes in lifestyle and stresses that many women face in their 40s and 50s that can affect their weight maintenance. A big one is raising a family while simultaneously handling the demands of a full-time career. Stress, no matter what its origin, can make you want to eat more. It can also point you in the direction of higher-fat comfort foods.

People also tend to be less active as they age, says Ramieri.

"Even if they think they're as active as they are, they're not," he says. "A 25- or 30-year-old woman will go out and rake the entire garden and do planting for a whole day. A 60-year-old woman will probably break that up into a three-day task. It's not the same physical stamina; it's just not there."

How much is

menopause to blame?

You can blame menopause, although that's up for debate. Medical professionals don't agree on how large a role menopause plays in midlife weight gain. Some think there's no connection at all.

"Quite frankly, I think it's a myth. It's not menopause that causes weight gain; it's the lifestyle change that happens as we age in this country," says Ramieri. He says the same trend of middle-age weight gain can be seen in men. "It's totally a lifestyle issue and a cultural American issue."

Others give menopause a lot more credit.

"We would conclude there's evidence that would support the idea that hormonal changes in menopause may contribute to weight gain over the fourth, fifth and sixth decades of life . . . We feel very comfortable saying that," says Judy Cameron, senior scientist at the Oregon Primate Center, which is part of the Oregon Health & Science University.

There is one phenomenon of midlife, however, that almost no woman can escape, no matter how thin she is: redistribution of body fat, says Schoenbeck.

"Every single woman who goes through this, almost without exception, will come in and start pointing to their belly and say, 'I have a belly now,'" says Schoenbeck, who works at Vermont Women's Choice Gynecological Associates in Burlington as a naturopathic physician, a primary-care doctor trained in natural therapies and preventive medicine.

Schoenbeck writes in her book that there's an increase in intra-abdominal fat (internal fat that cushions the intestines) "that occurs for almost every woman at menopause." This happens, she writes, because "in menopause, enzymes essentially direct abdominal cells to hold onto their fat!"

For many women, this leads to a sort of apple shape, where their weight is redistributed to the abdominal and upper body area.

"They are going to lose that hourglass figure," says Schoenbeck, adding, "It will save them a lot of grief if they will just accept that."

Great. Faced with a near guarantee your waistline will thicken as you age, what's there to hope for?

"The way you cope with this is, redefine what your goals are in terms of weight," says Schoenbeck. Focus less on thinking about what you want to look like and more on how you want to feel physically, she adds.

"If you think about what you really want to use your body for, rather than image what you want your body to look like, that's so much more realistic because then you can work toward attainable goals rather than the impossible goal of losing the belly entirely. You can do all the Pilates in the world and you won't lose that belly."

But you can still fight back.

As you strive to keep the weight gain to a minimum, be more conscious of your portion sizes, since your decreased metabolism no longer burns calories like it used to. Assess your carbohydrate intake. Don't eliminate carbs entirely because they're your body's main source of fuel. Ditch the white, refined, sugary kind of carbs and replace them, as much as possible, with whole grains and lots of fruits and vegetables. Slash your intake of saturated fats, which can lead to heart disease, and add more fiber, which can make you feel full so that you'll consume less. Be sure to include lean sources of protein, which can go a long way toward increasing that sense of satiety.

Don't slash your calories to the extent that you're starving. You will only gain weight when your hunger forces you to pig out.

And, yes, ladies, you will have to become more active. In order for exercise to really work, you will have to be consistent with it. Health experts recommend 30 to 60 minutes of aerobic, or cardiovascular, exercise most days of the week.

Peeke says you should aim to burn 300 calories per day through aerobic exercise.

You absolutely need to include weight-lifting, also known as strength training, in your exercise program, says Santoro and other health professionals.

"After 40, it's not just about aerobics anymore," she says. This is because you want to build your muscle mass in order to turn your body into a more efficient fat-burning machine, even at rest. "The more muscle you have," says Pinkerton, "the easier it is to lose weight."

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