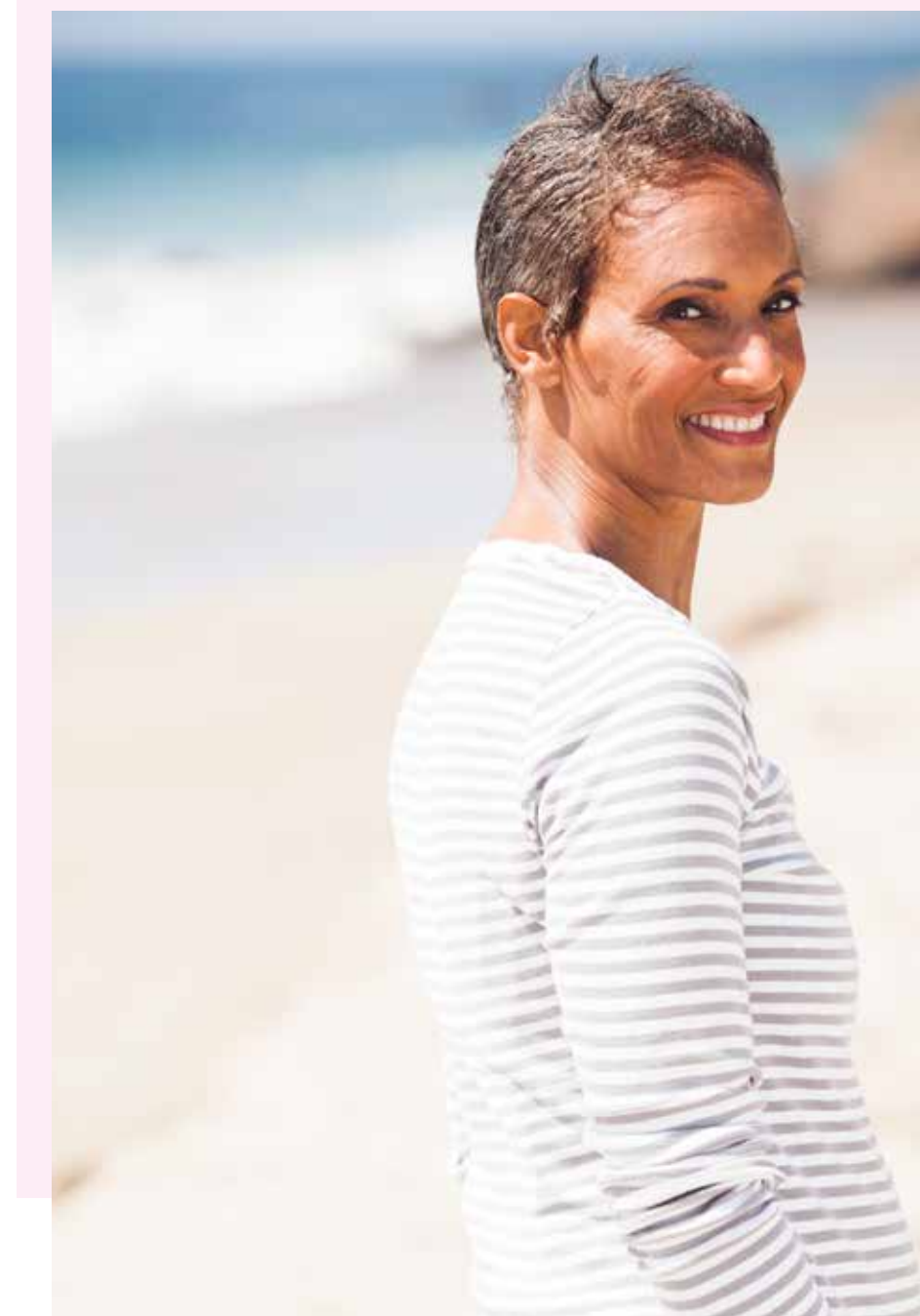


The art of MIDDLE management

Want some good news? Gaining weight at 40-plus isn't inevitable. These simple tips and lifestyle changes will help to banish that middle-age spread



As we get older, it's true that losing weight can feel like an uphill struggle. On average, women gain 2.1kg (4.6lb) every three years during their 40s and 50s, according to the Study of Women's Health Across the Nation (SWAN). 'While some of this weight change may be hormonal, the biggest reason why we gain weight is that we start to become less active, yet continue to consume the same amount of calories,' explains Lucie Nield, senior lecturer in nutrition & dietetics at Sheffield Hallam University.

On top of this, we naturally lose around 1-2% of our muscle mass per decade from our 30s onwards. 'The problem is, the less muscle mass you have, the fewer calories your body is able to burn both at rest and during activity, which results in a gradual slowing of your metabolic rate,' explains Dr Scott Robinson, a nutrition, metabolism and performance specialist. 'Without taking steps to prevent this, you are likely to gain weight as you get older.'

But, even if you stay the same weight, you may find that your shape changes once you hit the perimenopause and menopause, as fat shifts to your body's midsection. This carries an increased risk of developing chronic diseases, such as heart

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disease, certain cancers and type 2 diabetes. 'There is not a clear direct link between the menopause and weight gain, but there are many changes in our metabolism at the same time in life, which means that fat tends to disproportionately increase around the middle of our bodies,' explains GP and menopause specialist Dr Sarah Ball.

'Crucially, many of the symptoms of the perimenopause and menopause lead us to gain weight: for example, fatigue through poor sleep tends to result in less healthy dietary choices, such as craving chocolate, and we may be less energised and motivated to exercise,' Dr Ball continues.

Add menopause-related low mood and self-esteem and it can be easier to skip exercise and reach for sugary foods instead. Many women consume excess alcohol to numb feelings of low mood and anxiety, and the extra calories add up.

With so much seemingly stacked against us, what can we do? The good news is, science shows that through a combination of good nutrition and regular physical activity, you can tip the scales back in your favour. Here's how...



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7 STEPS TO PREVENT MID-LIFE WEIGHT GAIN

1 Aim for 200 fewer calories a day

One of the unfortunate realities of getting older is that you need fewer calories to sustain your weight than you did during your 20s and 30s. 'In general, energy requirements reduce by 150-250kcal per day, which is the equivalent of a small chocolate bar, a slice of cheese on toast, or a large glass of wine,' notes Lucie. In a 2019 study, researchers asked a group of 143 people, many of whom were in middle age, to eat whatever they liked but to cut their total calories by 25% for two years. It was a tall order and not many managed to stick to the recommended reduction. However, on average, the dieters managed to eat about 12% fewer calories - equivalent to cutting roughly 200 calories a day. As a result, they lost weight as well as experiencing health improvements such as lower cholesterol and blood pressure.

2 Look after your gut

Eating a diet with plenty of fibre encourages the growth of 'good' microbes in the gut, which play a role in our weight, appetite and hunger levels. 'These good microbes are able to harvest more calories from food than others, which may explain why there are differences in the way people respond to weight-loss diets,' explains Laura Tilt, a registered dietitian and host of *The Gut Loving Podcast*. 'Generally speaking, having a diverse microbiome (meaning lots of different types of microbes) is a good thing. One pattern we see is a reduction in diversity in individuals who are overweight, but we don't know if this is a cause or consequence of weight gain.'

3 Get a shift on

Boosting your daily activity will help combat a slowing metabolism and weight gain. One study of perimenopausal and menopausal women found that those who did at least two hours of moderate exercise a week had smaller waist measurements and weighed less than those who did no exercise. The NHS recommends 150 minutes (or five 30-minute sessions) per week of activities that leave you mildly out of breath and slightly sweaty, or 75 minutes of vigorous activity. 'You can exercise by walking, jogging, swimming or dancing,' explains Scott. 'The most important thing is to choose an activity that you enjoy doing. This makes it more likely that you'll stick to it long-term and see results.'

3 TIPS FOR BETTER GUT HEALTH

- **LOVE FIBRE** Eating a fibre-rich diet can help to promote a diverse gut microbiome. Aim to get your five-a-day and you'll be off to a good start, then check you eat something high in fibre at each meal - oats, seeds, beans, lentils, peas, buckwheat, wholemeal bread and cereal are good options.
- **KEEP MOVING** You've probably heard that exercise 'keeps you regular', but the benefits can also spread to your gut microbes. Scientists have found that people who exercise regularly have more microbes that have been linked with protection against weight gain.
- **EAT MORE PLANT FOODS** One study found that people who regularly ate 30 or more different types of plant foods per week had a more diverse microbiome than those eating 10 or fewer. So try to eat a mixture of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, seeds, nuts and pulses, rather than sticking to the same ones each day.



4 Include some resistance exercise

'Resistance exercise will help maintain muscle mass and improve balance, along with many other benefits,' explains personal trainer and founder of Onetrack running club Anthony Fletcher. Weights are worth the effort, but so too are simple bodyweight exercises that you can do at home, such as squats, press-ups and lunges. Exercise bands, simple circuits, ashtanga yoga, Pilates and body pump classes count, too. Anthony recommends doing a mixture of resistance and aerobic exercise. 'It really depends on your goal but, generally speaking, training four times a week, alternating strength and aerobic exercises, will preserve strength. Adequate recovery time of two to three days should be given between strength sessions. I can't recommend enough that someone spares the money to have a professional teach them how to squat, press and pull safely. Technique is an essential part of getting the right muscles to do the movements and provide the strength benefits you are looking for.'

5 Eat enough protein

Not eating enough protein can accelerate the natural loss of muscle as you get older.

Experts say you should aim for a daily protein intake of 1.2g per kg bodyweight per day to help preserve muscle mass and strength, which equates to 72g for a 60kg woman. This is more than the recommended daily amount for younger adults because our ability to convert protein from food into muscle decreases as we get older, and the risk of muscle loss increases. 'Food like eggs, pulses, dairy foods, meat, fish or soya products are all great protein sources. Aim for about 25g protein at each meal,' advises nutritionist Claire Baseley. 'Protein can also help you to feel fuller for longer, and so can help you manage your weight, particularly if you consume it with high-fibre foods like vegetables and whole grains.'

6 Exercise before breakfast

A six-week study by scientists at the Universities of Bath and Birmingham found that people who exercised before breakfast burned double the amount of fat than those who exercised after breakfast. In terms of overall weight loss, it doesn't matter when you exercise, but a pre-breakfast workout, when insulin levels are lower, means you might use more fat and less carbohydrate for fuel. It also potentially lowers the risk of developing type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

7 Rethink HRT

In addition to providing relief from menopause symptoms, HRT may have beneficial effects on body fat distribution once we hit that stage of life. Of course, it won't stop you gaining weight if you consume more calories than you need, but it can minimise the shift in fat to your middle. In a Danish study, those women who

took HRT gained less fat over five years than those who didn't. They were also less likely to store this fat around their middles. The Women's Health Initiative study found HRT helped women maintain lean body mass and prevented a shift toward 'apple-shaped' fat distribution. For more information and advice about HRT and the menopause, see your GP or visit menopausedoctor.co.uk.



MID-LIFE MENU

Check out our three-day menu suggestions for waist-friendly, gut-friendly eating

DAY ONE

Breakfast

GRANOLA AND YOGURT BOWL Mix half a banana and a handful fresh or frozen berries with 150ml low-fat plain Greek yogurt. Spoon into a bowl and top with the remaining half banana, 1tbsp granola and a few walnuts.

Lunch

1 whole wheat wrap filled with 4 falafels, ½ sliced avocado, mixed salad leaves, tomato slices and 1tbsp hummus.



Dinner
LENTIL, CHICKPEA AND CAULIFLOWER DHAL Heat 1tbsp vegetable oil in a large pan and gently fry 1 finely sliced onion for 10min until completely softened. Stir in 5cm piece fresh root ginger, peeled and grated, 1tsp each ground coriander, turmeric and garam masala and 1-2 green chillies, deseeded and finely chopped, and cook for 1min until very aromatic. Add 150g red lentils (well washed), 3 tomatoes, chopped, and 600ml water, and bring to the boil. Turn down heat and simmer for 35min, adding 250g cauliflower florets for the final 10min of cooking. The lentils should be fairly mushy. Stir in 400g tin chickpeas, drained and rinsed, and 100g baby leaf spinach to wilt. Check seasoning (it will take a fair amount of salt) and serve sprinkled with coriander and a dollop of dairy-free coconut yogurt, if you like.

Snacks

- 2 clementines.
- A handful (25-40g) mixed nuts.

DAY TWO

Breakfast

BERRY BIRCHER MUESLI Mix 25g oats, 150ml low-fat plain Greek yogurt and 1tbsp sultanas. Leave overnight in fridge, then stir in 1 grated apple, a handful raspberries or blueberries and a few flaked almonds.

Lunch

BUTTERNUT SQUASH AND CHICKPEA SALAD Arrange in a bowl 200g (½ a tin) chickpeas, 125g (½ a packet) cooked quinoa, 100g each roasted butternut squash and red peppers, a handful rocket, 25g goat's cheese and 1tbsp hummus.

Dinner

CHICKEN & VEGETABLE STIR-FRY WITH SESAME In a pan, heat 1tbsp

DAY THREE

Breakfast

Roughly mash ½ an avocado on a slice of whole grain or rye toast, and top with 2 poached eggs. Scatter over 1tbsp mixed seeds (optional).

Lunch

CHUNKY LENTIL AND TOMATO SOUP Heat 2tbsp olive oil in a large pan and add 1 large leek, thinly sliced, and 1 medium onion, thinly sliced. Cover and cook gently for 10min. Add 1 garlic clove, crushed, 2½cm fresh root ginger, finely chopped, 1tsp smoked paprika, ¼ swede, peeled and cut into 1cm cubes, 1 large parsnip, chopped, and 1 large courgette, roughly chopped, and fry for 3min. Stir in 100g red lentils, 500ml hot vegetable stock, 2 x 400g cans plum tomatoes and 1 cinnamon stick. Simmer for 25min until the vegetables and lentils are tender, stirring occasionally to help break up the tomatoes. Remove the



vegetable oil and fry ½ chopped onion, 1 crushed garlic clove and a thinly sliced chicken thigh fillet until chicken is browned. Add a handful each broccoli florets, mangetout and mushrooms and fry for 4-5min, then add soy sauce to taste and scatter over 1tsp sesame seeds. Serve with cooked whole wheat noodles.

Snacks

- 50g (¼ tub) hummus with carrot sticks.
- A handful toasted pumpkin seeds.

cinnamon stick and add the juice of ½ lemon and most of a large handful spinach. Check the seasoning. Ladle into bowls and garnish with the remaining spinach and 2-3tbsp grated cheese.

Dinner

FISH AND BEANS EN PAPILOTTE Put a white fish fillet in the middle of a 30cm square of baking parchment or foil. Spoon over 100g (¼ tin) cannellini beans, then add a handful each carrot batons and red pepper strips, 1 slice lemon and 2 sprigs rosemary. Fold paper to make a parcel, then bake at 180°C (160°C fan) mark 4 for 15min. Serve with brown rice.

Snacks

- 2-3 oatcakes spread with nut butter.
- 170g low-fat Greek yogurt with a handful fresh berries and a drizzle of honey. □



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