

Move more:
changing sedentary
habits is a good
place to start



Stop your midlife spread

Gaining weight seems inevitable as you age, but a few simple lifestyle changes can help keep the pounds at bay, says Louise Atkinson

Back in my 20s and 30s, I felt I had some control over my weight. There was a clear 'input/output' relationship with calories: if I went to the gym or cycled to work a few days each week, I could pretty much eat whatever I liked. Then in my 40s, I found I had to curb my cake habit and dabble with a bit of pre-holiday dieting to minimise the spillage over my size-12 jeans. But now, in my 50s, it's as if all bets are off - no matter how many sets of tennis I play, salads I eat or meals I skip, my waistline won't stop expanding.

THE TRUTH ABOUT METABOLISM

It would be great to blame a slowing metabolism - the long-held idea that our muscles naturally shrink a little with age, meaning we burn fewer calories and, unless we gradually shrink the amount of food we eat, the excess will simply accumulate as fat. But that theory was unceremoniously debunked by researchers at Duke University in North Carolina, who found that metabolism remains steady from our 20s to our 50s, only gradually slowing up after 60 - and then only dropping by a paltry 20% by the time we reach the age of 95.

Can I blame menopause then? Apparently, yes - partially. 'Weight can start to pile on because the levels of many hormones - notably oestrogen - start to fall in our 40s and 50s, just as other key metabolic hormones (insulin and the hunger hormones leptin and ghrelin) can rise,' explains Dr Sara Gottfried, a US hormone specialist and author of *Women, Food and Hormones* (Piatkus, £14.99). She says my thickening waist is probably due to 'fat redistribution' as the body attempts to make up for dwindling oestrogen levels by laying down a special kind of belly fat that actually produces its own oestrogen. According to nutritionist

Sam Rice, author of *The Midlife Method* (Headline Home, £14.99), our gut health can also take a hit as we age. 'Studies have shown that our guts become less efficient at digesting and metabolising food after the age of 40 because of changes to our gut bacteria,' she says. 'It's the perfect storm as far as our weight is concerned.'

It is also clear that my genes are stacked against me - there aren't many whippet-thin relatives in my ancestral history and, I have to admit, I really do love my food. That, according to the experts, could be the crux of my problem, and the reason why the latest statistics show women tend to gain an average of 1.5lbs a year in midlife, and why 70% of people in the UK aged over 45 are overweight or obese. We are just indulging in too much deliciously rich and calorific food.

But the good news is that recent research suggests it might take just a few tweaks to my diet and lifestyle to pull things back into line. Here's the lowdown...

TRY FASTING

Fasting has been an extremely popular weight-loss method in the last 10 years, especially with men who are not in the traditional market for prescriptive diets. The appeal is its simplicity: dramatically reduce your calorie intake for short periods of time and, in theory, you can eat what you like outside of that fasting window. The idea is that giving your body a break from food allows all the natural processes of repair to go ahead, which is very good for your long-term health - it helps our bodies repair and might even extend our lifespans by reducing our risk of chronic diseases like cancer.

Thankfully there's no need to go hungry for long. Studies by Professor Roy Taylor, a diabetes specialist at Newcastle ➤



'I'm convinced that eating enough protein is the best way to reduce hunger'

University, have found that cutting back to 800 calories can effectively 'mimic' the effects of fasting (without the extreme hunger), and recent studies by the University of Maryland have shown time-restricted eating, where you only eat within a 10-hour window and extend your normal nightly 'fast' to 14 hours, can supercharge a weight-loss programme.

'Fasting certainly works well for some people in midlife, who may have busy schedules and need an easy set of rules to follow,' says Sam Rice. 'The key is to manage your appetite, so you'll need to carefully consider when you tend to feel hungry and make precise decisions about your day-to-day routine,' she adds. 'If you are rarely hungry in the morning, it might be really easy for you to skip breakfast and divide your calories between lunch and dinner.'

FOCUS ON PROTEIN

New research from Professors David Raubenheimer and Stephen Simpson from the University of Sydney argues that we don't just have one appetite for food, but five: one each for protein, fat, carbohydrates, calcium and salt. They point out that we have sensors in our mouth, in the linings of our gut and within our brain to detect the presence of these nutrients, and if we don't get enough of them, we develop cravings.

Their research has shown that the need for protein (meat, fish, eggs and tofu, for instance) dominates the others and drives us to eat and keep on eating until our body's protein needs are met. Eat too little protein, they say, and you'll be tormented by cravings and likely to overindulge in all the wrong foods, while on a higher-protein diet your appetite can be satisfied with far fewer calories.

Dr Michael Mosley, author of *The Fast 800 Keto* (Short Books, £9.99) is a fan of this 'protein hypothesis'. 'Although current guidelines are for women to eat around 45g of protein a day and men to eat 55g, I believe these numbers are too low,' he says. His successful weight loss plan is calibrated so 20-25% of the diet is protein, ultimately aiming for 70-80g of protein a day for women and 90-100g a day for men. 'I'm convinced that ensuring you are eating enough good-quality protein every day is the best way to reduce hunger, avoid cravings and preserve your muscles.'

STAND UP MORE

Regular exercise certainly burns calories and has been shown to have numerous other health benefits for body and brain, but it's great to discover you can boost your metabolism effortlessly (and slow the speed of midlife weight gain), simply by spending less time sitting down and maybe fidgeting a bit. When we sit for long periods, the body shuts down - switching off the enzymes that are responsible for fat-burning and dramatically reducing our metabolic rate, creating a perfect environment for disease and decay. However, standing up, even briefly, gets all the systems moving again. For every

minute you stand you burn an extra 0.7 of a calorie, which may not sound like much, but that's 42 extra calories an hour. So half a day of standing burns an extra 250 calories - equivalent to a 30-minute jog.

The best way to change sedentary habits is to set a timer to ping on your phone every 30 minutes as a reminder to stand up - and it's a good idea to keep the remote control out of reach so you have to stand up every time you want to change the channel.

And when you are sitting, remember to fidget. A 2016 study by researchers at the Mayo Clinic in Arizona found that fidgeting (sitting on a wobble cushion or resting feet on a vibrating footrest) allows you to burn up to 30% more calories than when using a standard chair.

EAT LESS PROCESSED FOOD

In the last few years, a scientific spotlight has been shone on our increasing consumption of ultra-processed foods (UPFs) with worrying links to our ever-rising obesity levels. UPFs are defined as any manufactured food or drink that contains highly processed ingredients, plus chemicals in the form of flavourings, texturising and colouring agents, and taste modifiers.

The more UPFs you eat and the more regularly you eat them, the more that health concerns can start to creep in, according to Dr Anthony Fardet, a senior research scientist and academic specialist in preventative diets and the health potential of foods.

'UPFs contain many additives that have an as-yet-unknown cocktail of effects. They are also generally too salty, too sweet and too fatty. Then you add in the impact of industrial processing such as puffing,' he says, referring to the way the processing breaks down the natural structure matrix of foods (effectively 'pre-chewing' them) which means that many UPFs have a very high glycaemic index and can send blood sugars soaring.

Dr Fardet warns that many foods with 'healthy' labels such as 'enriched with', 'low fat' or 'light' can sometimes be among the most heavily processed, as manufacturers combine various chemical cocktails to replace fat, sugar or the nutrients stripped out during the processing. He suggests cutting back to two portions of ultra-processed food a day (but not every day) and hunting down alternatives that have a short list of recognisable ingredients on the packet.

CUT BACK ON ALCOHOL

Alcohol consumption can easily creep up without us even noticing. A recent study by researchers in Denmark and Australia found women aged 50 to 69 who consume alcohol at high levels tend to perceive their drinking as normal. Nutritionist May Simpkin (maysimpkin.com) warns against the calorie creep. 'Alcohol is full of empty calories that don't nourish or satiate, and it can trigger cravings for high calorie sugary foods,' she says.

'It is also important to remember that alcohol is a toxin that can exacerbate menopausal symptoms. As you get older, the



Consuming unprocessed foods is key to midlife weight management

PUT AN END TO MINDLESS EATING

One of the biggest hidden factors behind midlife weight gain is the 'mindless' eating that sees us nibbling the French fries from someone else's plate, finishing off the last piece of cake, or buttering the crust from a loaf of bread while preparing dinner.

An effective way to shock yourself back into awareness of what you're eating and when is to keep a detailed food diary. A 2019 study from the University of Vermont found dieters who spent just 15 minutes a day recording their food intake were more successful at losing weight than non-recorders.

'Awareness is key,' says psychologist and author Dr Meg Arroll (drmegarroll.com). 'So many of the people who come to me for weight-loss guidance say, "I can't understand why I'm not slim - I barely eat anything!" Keeping a food diary can be a powerfully effective wake-up call.'

Dr Meg recommends keeping a slightly more detailed 'food/mood' diary, where you jot down what you've eaten or drunk along with details such as how you're feeling, who you're with, and what you're doing at the time. 'This is a great way to pick up on behaviour patterns around food - (are you eating because you're stressed, bored or lonely), and it helps you to think about ways that you might replace some mindless eating with healthier behaviours,' she says.

body becomes less efficient and takes longer to process toxins effectively,' she adds.

May recommends making a conscious effort to cut back. 'Try to associate alcohol consumption with food, so you mainly enjoy alcohol as an enhancement to your meal,' she says, 'then reduce your consumption further by alternating alcoholic drinks with soft drinks and serving wine in small glasses.'

GET MORE SLEEP

A run of poor sleep could also be causing weight gain. This is because losing sleep triggers a set of reactions that make you more tempted by cravings and prone to snacking. A 2019 study from Penn State University in the US found that just four late nights in a row was enough to change the way you metabolise food, leading to a surge in insulin that can leave you feeling hungry all the time. Other studies suggest this disruption can occur after just one sleepless night.

'Unfortunately, your body regards a bad night's sleep as a stressful situation. Levels of cortisol, the stress hormone, rise, triggering a release of glucose into the blood. By the time you do get out of bed, your body will have released insulin to counteract that glucose rush, and you are likely to be met by strong sugar cravings as soon as you reach for your first cup of tea or coffee,' explains Dr Michael Mosley. Studies show sleep-deprived people consume, on average, an extra 385kcal a day, which is equivalent to the calories in a large muffin.

If you find menopausal symptoms (or addictive box sets) are reducing the length and quality of your sleep, it's a good idea to check your sleep hygiene. Is your mattress still offering you enough support? Is your bedroom dark, quiet, comfortable and conducive to rest? Switch off all screens an hour before bed, have a warm bath (ideally scented with calming lavender oil) and get an early night whenever you can. Your waistline, as well as your busy brain, will thank you for it. ■

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