Women's Health Tip of the Month

Menopause and Weight

Unwanted weight gain is frustrating at any age, but if you've hit menopause you may feel the deck is stacked against you. Falling hormone levels, specifically estrogen, stress and inadequate sleep make some menopausal women prone to weight gain, especially in their abdomens. Unfortunately, menopausal weight gain isn't just uncomfortable — it's hard on your health. Visceral fat that builds under the abdominal wall is particularly risky because it's correlated with an increased risk of heart disease, high blood pressure and insulin resistance, which can lead to diabetes.

However, while menopause may be challenging, you're still in control when it comes to your health. "[Menopausal] weight gain doesn't have to be inevitable," says Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Spokesperson Vandana Sheth, RDN, CDE. With an active lifestyle and a healthy diet, you can feel more comfortable during this stage of your life.

Keep Moving

We naturally lose muscle mass as we age. If you don't replace that lost muscle, your body will have less muscle and more fat, which will slow your metabolic rate. Staying active in your 40s and 50s helps keep your metabolism humming.

"Incorporate physical activity as part of your daily routine," recommends Sheth. "Aim for a minimum of 150 minutes per week of aerobic activity and include strength training exercises at least twice a week."

Not only will strength training replace your lost muscle mass, but it also helps to slow mineral loss in your bones which can lead to osteoporosis.

Eat Well

Small changes in your diet can help prevent menopausal weight gain. "In general, you need 200 less calories a day to maintain your weight during your 50s," says Sheth.

The following healthy, whole foods are especially beneficial for women in premenopause or menopause:

- *Bananas.* Bananas (along with apricots, avocados and sweet potatoes) are high in potassium, which helps regulate blood pressure.
- *Blueberries.* This fruit is full of stress-snuffing antioxidants and vitamin C. Plus, blueberries are high in fiber and low in calories.
- *Dark, leafy greens.* These vegetables are rich in calcium and vitamin K, which help support bone health. Women over 50 should aim for 1,200 milligrams of calcium daily.
- *Omega 3's.* Omega-3-rich foods raise good cholesterol. Oily fish are also good sources of vitamin D, which aids calcium absorption. You need 600 IU of vitamin D a day
- *Whole-grain bread and oatmeal.* Studies show that soluble fiber may help your body remove cholesterol. The requirement for fiber decreases at age 50, so aim for about 21 to 30 grams of total fiber per day.
- *Water.* Water helps move fiber through your system, keeps you hydrated and may mitigate hot flashes. Drink 8-10 glasses a day.

Menopausal women should watch their sodium intake and also limit themselves to one alcoholic drink per day. If you suffer from hot flashes, try eliminating caffeine and spicy foods, which could trigger hot flashes in some people.