

Factors That Influence Body Weight During the Menopause Transition

Hillary Wright, MEd, RDN and Elizabeth Ward, MS, RDN

Perimenopause and menopause often means weight gain, and mostly around your mid-section. Here are many of the factors that contribute to body weight at this time of life.

Body composition – Regardless of weight, having more muscle tissue means you burn more calories even at rest. *Genetics can also influence weight/body composition.*

Calorie balance – While calories are important for weight control, estimates for how many calories you consume each day and burn in physical activity are just that – estimates. Our unique genetics and body composition influence our metabolic rate in ways that can't be captured without complex metabolic testing.

Diet quality – A diet rich in vegetables, whole fruits, whole grains, legumes, nuts/seeds, seafood and poultry (over red meat) is associated with better weight management and overall health. Eating more highly processed food, like refined grains and foods with a lot of added sugars, may spike blood glucose (sugar) levels, which increases insulin production from the pancreas. Insulin's job is to allow glucose into the cells to be used for energy and to store glucose as glycogen which is fuel for our muscle and other body cells, and to store energy in fat tissue to be used by the body when you're not eating.

Eating pattern – An increasing amount of research is suggesting that many of us (if not most) are designed to more favorably metabolize food during the "sun up" time of day with the expectation that after the sun goes down our body will use energy from our stored calorie reserves because we won't be eating (as was the case throughout most of human history). These metabolic and hormonal shifts that occur over each 24-hour period are called *circadian rhythms*, and our modern

shift toward eating less during the day and more at night may be contributing to progressive weight gain in many people.

Less home cooking and more dining out – Meal planning and preparation skills have historically been passed on from one generation to the next. With the decline in home cooking, we have become more reliant on eating prepared and restaurant meals, which are often much higher in calories than we realize. A study from Tufts University researchers published in the Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics found the average sit-down restaurant meal contains 1205 calories, not including drinks, appetizers or desserts, with the worst offenders being Italian, Chinese and American fare weighing in at 1495 calories in the entrée alone.

Using food to manage stress – Research from the National Weight Control Registry shows that one of the strongest factors influencing whether someone regains weight after a period of loss is stress eating, emphasizing the importance of nurturing alternative ways to manage stress and work on your relationship with food if needed.

Weight Management Requires a Multi-Step Process of Behavior Modification, Not a Temporary Diet

Step 1: What is my emotional relationship with food like? Am I a “good food/bad food” thinker? Do I define my sense of self by how I’m eating? Do I tend to exaggerate the influence on my weight and health of individual foods or eating episodes? Do I turn to food when I feel stressed, sad, angry, lonely or tired?

Step 2: Have I looked at all the elements of my life and determined where I will work in the time for self-care (energy and effort required to plan and prepare my foods, include some regular physical activity, sleep, nurture my emotional health), or am I thinking I will just add it to my long list of things that already make up a busy life?

Step 3: Do I have a plan for the tools and supports I’ll need to change my eating habits in a way that I can live with long-term, accepting that this takes more time,

trial and error, and energy than following an over-restrictive “diet” for a period of time?

- ***Diets offer the false promise that if you just “follow the rules” for a period of time and lose weight, you’ll THEN somehow learn to address steps 1 and 2, which are key to good health and lasting weight management.***
- ***Be aware that losing as little as 5 to 10% of excess weight may be enough to significantly improve your health even if you still weigh more than you’d like.***