



The Long and Winding Road: The Cycles in a Woman's Life

When many of us hit our forties, all the birthday presents and cards in the world can't disguise one significant fact: We've gained weight. No longer can we get away with eating that extra slice of pepperoni pizza on Monday, that double cheeseburger and large fries on Friday, or that chocolate ice cream sundae on Saturday.

In our twenties, however, ahhh, that's when we could eat. Late-night parties where the four food groups were nachos, potato chips, sour cream dip, and beer. Decadent Sunday brunches of chocolate chip pancakes with a side of bacon. Then we'd slip into another size 4 pair of jeans and head out for a day of antiquing or roller blading or any of the other thousand things we used to do before we had kids and soccer games and husbands and houses and dogs to fill our weekends. If we gained a few pounds, no problem. A couple of nights at the gym, a jog along the beach, and poof! The extra weight was gone.

No more. Now, in addition to the fullness of our lives, we've added the fullness of our figures,

mainly around our hips, butts, thighs, and pouchy stomachs.

Even more discouraging: Those pounds seem stuck to us with Superglue.

And so we moan the eternal moan of forty-something women throughout America: Whhhhy-y-y-y-y?

We Just Don't Move the Same Way

For starters, we're not as physically active as we were in our early twenties. Then, we were likely to go jogging, walking, cycling, and swimming with friends. Now, we're lucky if we get out of the car or move away from the computer because we're so focused on our careers and families, says Pamela Peeke, M.D., assistant clinical professor of medicine at the University of Maryland in Bethesda and author of *Fight Fat after Forty*.

"Many women are working and sitting on their bottoms all day long," says Dr. Peeke. "The

lawyer becomes a judge, so she's no longer standing in court. And when she goes out, it's for a lunch meeting, not a night out on the town."

Then there's our kids. Lord knows we love them. But when you think about what they did to our bodies . . . Pregnancy often pads our bellies, hips, and thighs with fat that only daily exercise will budge. In fact, it brings one of our worst nightmares to life: It creates new fat cells that may *never* die. That's one reason why it often takes 10 years to lose the weight that we gained in 9 months.

And, of course, there's perimenopause, that 5- to 10-year period before menopause actually hits. During this time, our hormones are fluctuating as wildly as when we were teenagers. Only this time, instead of speeding things up, they're slowing things down.

Cheer up. There are many positive steps that we can take to slow down the normal aging process and meet our weight loss goals. They just require a little more of that wisdom and ingenuity that we've amassed with age.

Curling Iron

Muscle should be considered a hot commodity because it incinerates calories. Every pound of muscle on your body burns at least 35 calories a day; a pound of fat burns about 2. And that's just while



WOMAN TO WOMAN

Winning the Fat War

Ellen Kanz of Bloomsbury, New Jersey, first realized that she had a weight problem in the third grade. By the time she turned 13, she tipped the scales at 200 pounds. Disgusted with the way she looked, Ellen went on one starvation diet after another. Each time, the pounds came off, but she quickly regained them all—and then some. At her heaviest, Ellen weighed 225 pounds and wore a size 24. Today, at age 52, she is 50 pounds thinner and wears a size 14. She credits eating sensibly and daily physical activity with helping her stay fit and trim for the past 8 years. Here's how she did it.

I was 13 years old when I first started dieting. My mom took me to a doctor who prescribed prescription weight loss pills. From that point on, I started a pattern of losing and gaining 20 to 40 pounds by starving myself. That went on for years.

My weight problem was clearly the result of my eating too much candy, desserts, and fast foods. I love chocolate, ice cream, tacos, pizza, hamburgers, French fries, and onion rings. So every time I lost the weight, I'd start eating these foods again and gain it right back.

Finally, in 1991, I did something different: While living in Florida, I started eating sensibly and swimming about 100 laps a day. A year later, I had lost 40 pounds. It took a while to lose the weight, but I was able to maintain it. I discovered that if I make a commitment to weight loss and take my time, the pounds stay off. That realization never occurred to me before.

Now, I walk 3 miles a day five times a week. I limit my sweets and fast foods, and I focus on healthy eating. I eat bagels and yogurt for breakfast and vegetables, salads, sandwiches, and lean meats for lunch and dinner. I also drink a lot more water.

Despite my success, I'm still learning how to eat more healthfully each day. My goal is to lose another 10 to 15 pounds. And that's doable as long as I continue to walk in the right direction.

FAT CAN BE A GOOD THING

Did you know that carrying around a few extra pounds in your menopausal years can be an advantage?

If you're physically active, no more than 20 pounds overweight, and your additional padding is on your hips and thighs instead of your abdomen, you'll have more estrogen in your body than your thinner counterparts. Estrogen resides in fat, which may mean fewer hot flashes, less vaginal dryness, and a lower risk for developing osteoporosis, says Denise Bruner, M.D., president of the American Society of Bariatric Physicians and a physician practicing in Arlington, Virginia.

Body fat also offers some protection against osteoporosis by acting as a reserve bank when you don't meet your nutritional needs. "There are certain times when your muscles pull what they need from your fat stores instead of your bones to sustain themselves, which keeps your bones intact," says Dr. Bruner.

What's more, added fat preserves vitamin D, needed for calcium absorption.

you're lying on your back reading the latest *Cosmo*.

That's one reason why we could eat whatever we wanted when we were younger and still not gain weight, says Denise Bruner, M.D., president of the American Society of Bariatric Physicians and a physician practicing in Arlington, Virginia.

But beginning around age 20, thanks to a combination of aging and sedentary lifestyle, we start losing muscle—about 5 pounds every decade. By the time we hit our forties, we're burning 350 fewer calories a day than we did in our twenties. By our sixties, we'll be burning 700 fewer calories. This adds up to 10 more pounds of weight every decade if we don't change our eating and exercise habits.

The Hormonal Roller Coaster

At some point in our forties, that delicate balance of female hormones goes awry. Estrogen levels start to drop, along with progesterone, DHEA (dehydroepiandrosterone), and thyroid and growth hormones, all of which can dramatically slam the breaks on our metabolism. Here's how each affects our weight.

Estrogen. Falling estrogen levels can rearrange body fat. The fat that once graced your hips and thighs in your twenties and thirties suddenly makes a beeline for your stomach, changing your pear shape into an apple. Why? The less estrogen you have, the more you have of certain enzymes that make your stomach area suck up the fat.

"You literally go from being a metabolic furnace in your twenties to a glacier in your forties and fifties," says Dr. Peeke.

The good news is that we can regain every pound of muscle that we've ever lost, and then some, through weight training. Devoting just 20 minutes three days a week to strengthening our arms, shoulders, back, stomach, chest, and legs can help us build about one pound of muscle every month. After 2 months, our bodies will burn 70 calories more a day.

Add aerobic exercise like brisk walking, jogging, or cycling to your weight routine, and you'll burn up to an additional 300 calories per each 45-minute session. "It will keep you metabolically hot," says Dr. Peeke. "You want your muscles rocking and rolling."

Too much fat around tummies is toxic, says Dr. Peeke, because it can set us up for heart disease, diabetes, and cancer later in life. "So women have to be on the red alert to keep that fat down to a minimum."

Thyroid hormone. Your thyroid gland, a butterfly-shaped organ nestled at the base of your throat, is a metabolism regulator. When all goes well, the gland pumps out just the right amount of the hormone thyroxine to keep things running smoothly. If the pipeline slows, then your metabolism starts to crawl, says Eneida O. Roldan, M.D., chair of the American Board of Bariatric Medicine.

It's normal for your thyroid to produce less thyroxine as you age, says Dr. Roldan. "That's why it's very important for women in their forties to do some kind of weight training."

Progesterone. Produced in your ovaries during the second half of your menstrual cycle, progesterone actually boosts your body's ability to burn fat. It keeps your thyroid gland working properly and stabilizes blood sugar so that you're less likely to snack. Less progesterone, less fat burning.

DHEA. Shortly after you reach age 20, this anti-aging hormone also begins to diminish. By the time 40 rolls around, your body makes about half as much as it did. And that's a shame. The less DHEA you have, the slower your metabolism and the easier it is to put on weight, says Dr. Bruner.

What's more, DHEA stabilizes levels of insulin, the hormone that sweeps glucose out of your bloodstream and into your cells to be used as energy. Too little DHEA means too much insulin, which prevents your body from breaking

10 POUNDS LOST TO GAIN HEALTH BENEFITS

If your doctor says that you must lose weight, don't press the panic button. All you probably need to do is drop 10 pounds. That's all it takes to lower your blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugar levels, says Pamela Peeke, M.D., assistant clinical professor of medicine at the University of Maryland in Bethesda and author of *Fight Fat after Forty*.

What's more, the first 10 pounds lost will help you place less stress on your hips and knees and thus help prevent painful osteoarthritis. You'll gain more energy, boost your self-esteem, and decrease your risk of heart disease; cancers of the breast, ovaries, endometrium, and colon; and stroke.

down and using fat stores, and also increases your appetite.

Growth hormone. Like DHEA, growth hormone is abundant in our youth. It keeps our cells vigorous and active and maintains lean body mass, bone density, and a healthy muscle-to-fat ratio. But as we age and our supply plummets, so does our ability to burn calories without exercise. The muscle we lose literally gets replaced by fat, says Dr. Bruner.

With all these forces of nature working against us, it's tempting to just lie back and accept the inevitable. But just as you can control how much muscle you preserve—and gain—through weight training, you can get your hormones back in sync with various therapies that only your physician can prescribe, including hormone replacement therapy and synthetic thyroid or growth hormones.

Responsibility Overload

In addition to our jobs, we're wives, mothers, chauffeurs, housekeepers, cooks, and accoun-

SAY IT TO BE IT: TOP 10 AFFIRMATIONS

Just as an athlete needs to practice and train her muscles to be strong and in shape, successful weight managers need to practice and train to develop a positive attitude about their weight loss efforts. That's one reason many weight management programs use positive affirmations or "self-talk."

"In our society, there are many negative messages about weight, willpower, and body image," says Lisa Talamini, R.D., director of program development and nutrition at Jenny Craig in La Jolla, California. To counter these external negatives and retrain your mindset, practice saying or writing powerful, positive statements like these.

1. I can enjoy all my favorite foods in moderation.
2. I take the time to nourish my body.
3. Every time I eat a food, I enjoy its color, its taste, and its texture.
4. I can be more active today than I was yesterday.
5. Today, I keep my body and my mind in balance.
6. I reward myself for every positive change I make in my life.
7. I live by choice, not by chance.
8. I am learning to love my body and myself.
9. I accept myself just as I am.
10. I ride the wave of my temptations.

tants. Many of us also care for aging parents. That leaves very little time for ourselves. Going to an exercise class at the gym? Hah! About as likely as taking a spur-of-the-moment vacation to the Bahamas.

Playing these different roles adds up to big-time stress, another contributor to weight gain. Chronic stress causes our bodies to release the hormone cortisol, which sends fat straight to our stomachs, says Dr. Roldan.

Even women who are full-time homemakers are at risk, says Dr. Roldan. They're more likely

to experience low self-esteem and depression, which can often lead to inactivity and overeating. "Some homemakers may be totally dependent on their families for their self-worth, and that changes once the kids go off to college." The solution is to put yourself at the top of your list of things to do, and don't feel guilty about it. Care for yourself the way you care for your family. Set aside time to exercise and unwind when you know you won't be disturbed. If that means getting up before your family rises, so be it, says Dr. Roldan.

"Let's say your mom is in the hospital with a broken hip," says Dr. Peeke. "Go visit her. Get her the flowers. Spend time with her. Then get out to the gym for 20 to 30 minutes or walk briskly around the hospital grounds. You'll recharge your batteries, and you'll feel better."

The Dietary Checkup

With all the stress and time pressures in your life, grabbing an extra piece of chocolate, a bowl of ice cream, or a bag of potato chips soon becomes the norm. And if dinner isn't cooked, you're more likely to drive to the nearest fast-food restaurant. Eating out? That's a reward for all of your hard work. After all, you reason, "I deserve it."

But those calories add up, and so do the pounds. "Fast food is convenient but very high in fat. You neglect to eat your fruits and vegetables, and so does your family," says Priscilla Clarkson, Ph.D., professor of exercise science at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst.

A food plan to help you cope with daily stress,

strengthen your immune system, maintain muscle mass, and produce a gradual weight loss looks like this:

Nix refined carbohydrates. This includes white flour, white rice, white pasta, white potatoes, white bread, and table sugar, which is found in cookies, cakes, and sweetened cereals. Their high-sugar content causes normal insulin levels to skyrocket, placing undue stress on your body. "Your insulin levels literally go up and down like a roller-coaster," says Dr. Peeke. "And if this happens consistently, you risk developing diabetes down the line because your body is constantly dealing with a boatload of sugar and isn't releasing a steady flow of insulin that you'd get by eating high-fiber foods."

Get the dark starches. Eat brown rice, whole wheat or spinach pasta, whole wheat bread, and sweet potatoes. Cook with monounsaturated fats such as olive oil and canola oil to strengthen your immune system, and choose low-fat protein such as poultry, fish, and lean red meat. "Proteins are the building blocks of muscle, so these foods will preserve lean mass and bolster your metabolism," says Dr. Peeke.

Time your carbs. Eat your high-fiber starches before 5:00 P.M. Even though they're chock-full of nutrients, they're also high in calories. "You'll never lose weight faster than if you eliminate the starches after 5:00 P.M. Your weight will peel right off," says Dr. Peeke. That's because high-fiber starches like rice don't come in single-serving packages, so we're more likely to overeat.

Drink the right liquids. Avoid alcohol. While there isn't any fat in alcohol, it's loaded with sugar and, thus, calories that get stored as fat, says Dr. Roldan. Gram for gram, alcohol provides more calories than carbohydrates or proteins: One gram of fat supplies 9 calories; alcohol has 7, and carbohydrates and protein each have 4. If that isn't bad enough, drinking even moderate amounts can increase your appetite and cause you to lose control over how much you're eating. So stick with one alcohol serving a day, says Dr. Roldan. Either a 12-ounce can of beer, 1½ ounces of hard liquor, or 5 ounces of wine. The best beverage for weight loss? Good old-fashioned water. It's fat- and calorie-free.