

# Maintaining your weight and health during and after menopause

Both men and women can gain weight as they age, but for women, it can be difficult to separate the effects of ageing from the effects of menopause.

Menopause is a great time to speak with your doctor, assess your overall health and make changes to improve your lifestyle.

## Lifestyle choices and ageing are the main cause of weight gain after menopause

Between the ages of 45 and 55, women gain on average half a kilo a year.

Contrary to popular belief, weight gain around menopause is mainly associated with your lifestyle and ageing. Hormonal changes of menopause do result in a change in body composition with increased fat and decreased muscle (thus no net change in weight) and can cause fat to settle in your abdomen rather than your hips, thighs and buttocks.

It is a myth that Menopausal Hormone Therapy (MHT) causes weight gain, although some women might experience some fluid retention. On the contrary, MHT can decrease the accumulation of abdominal fat after menopause.

The good news is that making healthy lifestyle choices can help you to achieve and/or maintain a healthy weight and improve your future health. Healthy choices help at any age, but are even more important around the time of menopause.

Healthy choices you can make at menopause include:

- monitoring menopausal symptoms and other body changes and getting early advice from your doctor
- ensuring adequate intake of calcium (preferably through your diet) and vitamin D
- eating a healthy diet
- maintaining a healthy weight
- engaging in physical activity
- stopping smoking
- drinking no more than two standard alcoholic drinks per day.

**If you have any concerns or questions about weight gain or lifestyle options to improve your future health, visit your doctor or go to the Find an AMS Doctor service on the AMS website.**

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## MAIN POINTS

- Weight gain during and after menopause has more to do with your lifestyle and the changes of ageing than with hormonal changes of menopause.
- The hormonal changes of menopause can cause fat to settle in your abdomen rather than your hips, thighs and buttocks.
- Menopausal Hormone Therapy (MHT) does not cause weight gain and can reduce the abdominal fat caused by menopause.
- Menopause is a great time to visit your doctor, assess your overall health and make changes to improve your lifestyle and health.
- Eating a healthy diet, engaging in physical activity, stopping smoking and drinking less alcohol will help you to maintain a healthy weight beyond menopause.

## Benefits of maintaining a healthy weight beyond menopause

Excess abdominal fat is associated with heart (cardiovascular) disease and diabetes, so decreasing abdominal fat by maintaining a healthy weight can decrease your risk of these diseases.

For both women and men, maintaining a healthy weight and engaging in physical activity can also reduce the risk of other diseases such as cancer and dementia.

Obesity is a risk factor for more severe menopausal symptoms, so losing weight if you are overweight might also help to improve your symptoms.

Lifestyle choices will also improve your bone health and reduce the risk of osteoporosis. Post-menopausal women should consume 1300 mg of calcium each day (equivalent to 3–4 serves of low-fat dairy), preferably spread throughout the day. For older women, adequate vitamin D requires 15 to 30 minutes of sunshine, two to three times per week, but speak with your doctor about whether you might need vitamin D supplements. Participating in weight bearing and resistance exercise is also important (see below). Low body weight (body mass index < 18) is a risk factor for osteoporosis.



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# Maintaining your weight and health during and after menopause continued

## Healthy eating to reach and maintain a healthy weight

Whatever your weight, to reduce the risk of chronic disease you should eat a wide variety of nutritious foods. This strategy will also help you to improve your health through maintaining a healthy weight.

If you are overweight or you are gaining weight, speak with your doctor about a healthy diet plan and other lifestyle changes. We now know that diet and exercise plans should be tailored for each person and should take into consideration your physical condition and personal circumstances.

The debate about which dietary strategy (eg. low fat, low carbohydrate, high protein, intermittent fasting) is best to lose body fat is ongoing and requires more research. Your doctor is best placed to understand both your situation and the latest research and can discuss which approach might be best for you.

## Physical activity to promote your future health

During and after menopause, adequate physical activity can reduce the risk of chronic diseases of ageing and has other potential benefits such as:

- reducing cholesterol, blood pressure and improving heart health
- improving physical abilities and reducing risk of falls – strength, coordination, balance and endurance
- increasing muscle mass and bone strength
- reducing the risk of osteoporosis.

Your doctor can recommend a program of physical activity suited to your current physical condition.

The *Australian physical activity and sedentary behaviour guidelines for adults 18–64 years* recommend physical activity for all adults at all ages, including women during and beyond menopause.

The recommendation is for people to do either:

- 150 minutes (2.5 hours) of moderate intensity physical activity weekly

or

- 75 minutes (1.25 hours) of vigorous intensity physical activity weekly.

- To obtain greater benefits and help weight loss, avoid unhealthy weight gain and to reduce the risk of cancer, the recommendation is for women to do:

- 300 minutes (5 hours) of moderate intensity physical activity weekly

or

- 150 minutes (2.5 hours) of vigorous intensity physical activity weekly.

Activities of moderate intensity take effort, but you will still be able to talk. Examples include:

- brisk walking
- recreational swimming
- dancing
- household tasks like cleaning windows or raking leaves
- pushing a stroller.

Activities of vigorous intensity need more effort, and breathing becomes harder and faster. Examples include:

- jogging
- aerobics
- fast cycling
- organised sports
- tasks involving lifting, carrying or digging.

Muscle-strengthening exercises are also recommended at least twice per week.

If you are more than 65 years old, your physical activity program must take into account your health status and previous experience of a particular activity. Speak with your doctor for advice.

## Where can I find further information?

- Myths about MHT (see AMS fact sheet – *9 myths and misunderstandings about menopausal hormone therapy*)
- Osteoporosis (see [www.osteoporosis.org.au](http://www.osteoporosis.org.au))
- Healthy eating (see [www.eatforhealth.gov.au](http://www.eatforhealth.gov.au))
- Physical activity (see *Australian physical activity and sedentary behaviour guidelines for adults 18–64 years* at <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/health-pubhlth-strateg-phys-act-guidelines#apaadult>)

## Information for your doctor to read includes AMS Information Sheets:

- Osteoporosis
- Weight management and healthy ageing

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