

# Fighting fat at 40

You *can* avoid middle-age spread — and there are good health reasons to start doing so *now*, writes JOANNA McMILLAN PRICE

If you have found controlling your weight harder as you've got older, you're not alone. Data from the most recent Australian surveys show we do indeed get fatter as we get older. Obesity figures peak at around the 50- to 59-year-old age group and, for Australians in their forties, one in five men and one in four women are obese.

Making matters worse, this weight gain tends to accumulate around the middle, hence the term "middle-age spread", and this pattern of fat distribution carries an increased risk of diabetes, heart disease and high blood pressure.

Women tend to notice the most dramatic changes to their waistline around the menopausal years. Hormones can be blamed at least in part. They can't be blamed for the excess fat laid down, but hormones are involved in changing *where* you store excess fat.

Oestrogen levels drop by some 90 per cent during menopause and this change in the balance of hormones means women tend to take on a more male pattern of fat distribution: less on the hips, thighs and limbs and more around the waist.

This is one reason why the risk of heart disease in women increases after menopause and becomes similar to that for men.

In men, the changes may be more subtle, with waistlines slowly expanding over the years. You may suddenly notice how overweight you have become, but don't really know how or when it happened.

## BEATING MIDDLE-AGE SPREAD

The first thing to realise and accept is that middle-age spread is not inevitable, nor is

the cause of it any different from the cause of weight gain at any other time of life.

Aside from the change in fat distribution for women, the basic laws of biology apply: if you have gained weight over the past few years, you have been consuming more kilojoules than you have been expending.

It just feels like middle-age spread because that's when your expanded waistline becomes noticeable — in truth, it has been creeping up on you for many years. The average weight gain is around half a kilo a year. It doesn't seem like a lot, but 10 years later, you weigh 5kg more. If this continues, by the time you reach middle age you may well find you weigh at least 10kg more than you did in your 20s.

Why we experience this slow weight gain is complex. First, as we age, we slowly lose muscle, primarily because we don't use it. This in turn slows our metabolic rate and so we burn less energy every minute of every day.

Second, we continue to eat the same amount of food, sometimes more, with business lunches, socialising around food and perhaps greater affluence, allowing for more meals eaten out.

Finally, we tend to move less in terms of more structured exercise and in day-to-day activity. This can be a time factor and/or it can be linked to more health problems or aches and pains making you feel less like being active as you get older.

Interestingly for women there's also a psychological side to middle-age weight gain. In the Women's Health Australia Study, researchers followed 900 women over three years as they experienced menopause. They >





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found differences in behaviour and lifestyle between those women who gained weight and those who didn't.

Of little surprise is that the women who avoided weight gain were more likely to have cut back on high-fat foods, but they were also less likely to eat in response to emotions such as anger, anxiety and depression. It seems that, particularly during the menopause, a time of psychological change that affects some women more than others, finding non-food ways of dealing with negative emotions is important if you want to avoid putting on weight.

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While the philosophy is simple, as anyone who has tried to lose weight and keep it off knows full well, putting it into practice is much more difficult. But understanding how we burn and store fat can help to form the most effective approach to preventing weight gain and losing weight in middle age.

### THE MYTH OF THE 'FAT-BURNING ZONE'

The body burns two major fuels at rest and during exercise: fat and glucose (carbohydrate). But there is no switch from one to the other; rather, there is always a mix of the two. What does change is the ratio of fat to glucose being used.

At low compared to high intensities of exercise, the percentage of energy drawn from fat will be higher. This knowledge led to the widespread use in exercise circles of the "fat-burning zone". Many fitness instructors still use this and calculate according to your age the best heart rate for you to work at to burn fat.

It might sound a solid scientific way to increase fat burning, but there is a serious flaw in the theory. While at lower intensities

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HOW MUCH EXERCISE DO YOU NEED TO BEAT YOUR FOOD CHOICES			
Food	kJ per serve	Minutes walking required for a 70kg woman to burn off	Minutes walking required for a 85kg man to burn off
Croissant	1150	68	58
Whole milk cappuccino (220ml)	250	15	13
Apple	330	19	17
150ml glass of white wine	425	25	21
Chocolate biscuit	950	56	48
1 slice bread	310	18	16
Blueberry muffin (75g)	1120	66	56
300ml fresh orange juice	435	26	22
Chocolate 1 row (28g)	600	35	30

The above gives the approximate minutes of walking at 5km/h (moderate pace) to burn off the kilojoules in each food for 70kg and 85kg.

you might burn a higher proportion of fat, the total amount of energy you expend is less and therefore the total fat you use up is also likely to be less.

Furthermore, in the post-exercise period we continue to burn fat and, in fact, after working out at higher intensities, this post-exercise fat burning is greater than that following a lower-intensity workout.

To illustrate, let's consider two workouts. You plan a 30-minute exercise session. Will you burn more fat by walking — keeping your heart rate in the "fat-burning zone" — or by increasing the intensity and jogging?

Walking does indeed use a higher proportion of fat; in this example, 60 per cent of the total energy comes from fat. This decreases to 40 per cent of the total energy when we increase the intensity to a jog. However, because jogging uses more energy in total, the amount of fat used up remains almost the same. What's more, because the total energy expenditure is greater when jogging, you use up more of your glucose stores. In the first few hours after the exercise session, your body then works on restocking these stores from incoming food.

Meanwhile, the body continues to

burn fat to support the ongoing energy requirements. After the lower-intensity workout, this happens to a far less extent as less total energy was expended.

In other words, it's not just how much fat and energy is used up during the exercise session, but how much fat is used up in total during and after exercise. So forget about a fat-burning zone. Rather, work as hard as you can for the time you have. Of course, don't work so hard that you only keep it up for a short length of time — you need to keep the time-frame the same.

Alternatively, you can work at the lower intensity but do it for longer. But for those who already struggle to find the time to exercise, working out at a higher intensity is the effective route to results.

### THE BEST FAT-BURNING EXERCISES

#### 1 Lift weights

One of the reasons for middle-age spread is that we lose muscle as we age, resulting in a declining metabolic rate. It's not therefore surprising that lifting weights to maintain, or ideally increase, your muscle mass can dramatically reduce the gain in body fat over time.

A study of 164 overweight American women found that those who weight-trained twice a week over a two-year period decreased their body fat by 3.7 per cent, while the control group who did no weight training experienced no change. Furthermore the weight-training group significantly reduced the typical gain in fat around the middle — they experienced a



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gain of 7 per cent in intra-abdominal fat compared with 21 per cent in the control group. It's evidence that lifting weights can help to reduce middle-age spread.

### How to do it

- Join a health club and have a weight training program designed for you using gym equipment.
- Find a personal trainer who will design and supervise your strength-training workout. They may use a gym or bring their own equipment to work with you in your own home or outdoors.
- Use a home workout DVD incorporating resistance exercises using your body weight (can be just as effective as using weights), such as push-ups or using a resistance-training band.

## 2 Cardio exercise

Any exercise that raises your heart rate and gets you puffing and panting works the cardiovascular system, hence the term cardio exercise. With this form of exercise you can push the intensity of your workout and expend the most energy in a session. The more intense the workout, the more

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kilojoules are burned, so aim to work hard with the time you have.

This doesn't mean you have to go running. If you're a newcomer to exercise, a brisk walk may feel hard, but as you get fitter, you'll find you can increase the pace and keep the exercise challenging.

Whatever the mode of exercise, use a scale of 0-10 to help you work at the right level: 0 is at complete rest and 10 is extremely hard.



Aim to work at about 7-8 — hard enough to have you puffing but not so hard you couldn't keep it up for very long.

### How to do it

- Walking, jogging and running are hard to beat for cardio exercise. What's more, they're free (after the cost of a decent pair of shoes) and can be done at any time. This is ideal for busy people who struggle to find the time to work out. While running may not

be an option for many reasons, including bad backs, knees or being very overweight, almost everyone will benefit from walking. Set yourself a time or distance and aim to complete it at least every other day.

- Cycling is another good option, though you obviously need to invest in a bike and helmet to get started. Alternatively, look for an indoor cycling class or use the stationary bikes at your local health club or leisure centre. Cycling is non-weight-bearing and therefore can be ideal for those with joint pain who struggle with walking or jogging. However, make sure to get some advice from a professional to ensure you are set up correctly on the bike to avoid back or knee pain.
- Cardio machines, either on the gym floor or for home use, provide a convenient means of getting a cardio workout indoors. These include bikes, treadmills, cross-trainers, stair-climbers and rowing machines. Each has its own advantages and so a combination of equipment is best. Be wary of splurging on an expensive piece of equipment for home. More often than not, these end up gathering dust and taking up

space in the corner of the room. You're far better off joining a health club with a variety of equipment to enable you to vary your routine and stop boredom setting in.

### 3 Yoga

Yoga is usually thought of in relation to flexibility or stress-relief rather than fat-burning, but a US study of 15,500 middle-aged men and women found yoga may help to prevent middle-age spread in normal-weight people and may promote weight loss in those who are overweight. The normal-weight men and women who regularly practised yoga (at least 30 minutes one or more times a week) gained less weight over the study period of 10 years than those who didn't practise yoga. The results were more impressive for those who were overweight: those who practised yoga lost weight over the 10 years, while those who didn't gained over 6kg.

What's interesting about this study is that the results cannot simply be due to how much fat or total energy is burned by the exercise as most forms of yoga are not sufficiently aerobic to burn a serious amount

of kilojoules. The authors speculate that it's the psychological side of yoga that may elicit the effect.

Yoga involves building an inner strength, sometimes through a form of meditation, and develops body awareness. The theory is that, together, these factors help you to find the inner strength and resourcefulness to stick with a healthy eating plan and to respect your body enough to feed it well.

#### How to do it

- Look for a good yoga school in your area and experiment with different styles until you find one you like. Some are more physically demanding, while others may be of a more meditative nature.
- Most health clubs and leisure centres now run yoga classes, although often these are taught by fitness instructors who have learned yoga rather than by experienced yoga masters who have practised for many years. As a result, they may not remain as true to the original practice. Ask about the qualifications of the instructor if you're not sure.
- Practise in the comfort of your own home. You can either buy an instructional DVD or practise the moves you have learned in class. ■