

midlife emotions and weight gain



Are you a woman in your 40s or 50s? The physical and psychological changes that occur during these midlife years can cause emotional stress, which may lead to unwanted weight gain. What's going on, and how can you navigate more easily through your middle years? Get insights below from Cathy Cohen, MA, a nutrition counselor at a hospital-affiliated wellness center and a certified personal trainer and fitness instructor at a rehabilitation hospital adult fitness facility, both of which are in Westchester County, New York.

[1] A Time of Change
The midlife years can be particularly challenging for women. You face perhaps the most emotionally charged—and quite possibly most frustrating—time of your life in terms of trying to maintain an ideal body weight. Emotional issues that may have

been suppressed for years can surface during midlife. Divorce, financial burdens, retirement, empty nesting, a parent's illness or death, career moves and residential changes often occur, along with unpleasant menopausal symptoms, such as hot flashes, memory loss, slowed metabolism, mood swings, redistribution of body weight and sexual difficulties. These issues are only made worse by the constant barrage of unhealthy, unrealistically thin images foisted on women by the media. Failure to meet society's ideal female body image can be another major source of emotional stress.

[2] How Your Body Responds
These physical and psychological changes can cause stress. And during situations perceived as stressful, your sympathetic nervous system sets in motion a series of physiological responses, according to Hans Selye, MD, who pioneered the concept of emotional stress. Hormones produced by the

adrenal cortex, including cortisol and epinephrine, prepare the body for an instant state of readiness in the classic "fight or flight" response. Selye theorized that once the stress-invoking threat passed, the body returned to a state of **homeostasis**, or normalcy and balance. However, recent research shows that chronic outpouring of stress hormones may result in undesirable body changes. For example, some researchers believe that chronically elevated cortisol levels can lead to weight gain, especially in the belly.

[3] Causes for Weight Gain
You may also be gaining weight if you are reaching for food as comfort. While there is definitely a psychological basis for **emotional eating**, physiological issues also play a role. A groundbreaking study showed that foods high in fat and carbohydrate may actually fight stress by reducing cortisol levels in the body (Dallman et al. 2003). Deeper emotional issues can be the underlying reason for weight gain, as well. You may harbor unresolved issues well into midlife and beyond, perhaps striving to remain "protected" by your fat and thereby rendering future weight loss efforts futile. ■

stress management techniques

Consider these strategies for decreasing stress during midlife years.

- **Practice Mind-Body Techniques.** Yoga, Pilates, tai chi, meditation, breathing techniques, biofeedback, relaxation tapes, guided imagery, journal writing and other forms of self-expression are effective stress busters.
- **Exercise Regularly.** Exercise is a powerful tamer of emotional stress and menopausal symptoms. A fitness program that includes cardiorespiratory activity and strength training can help you lose body fat, build confidence, alleviate anxiety and depression, and boost self-esteem. (Work with a personal trainer if you need help developing a program.)
- **Eat Healthfully.** Eating healthy meals and snacks at regular intervals will keep your blood sugar levels in check and prevent hunger. However, occasionally indulging in your favorite treats is okay—and may actually prevent binge eating.
- **Monitor Your Eating.** Self-monitoring is an effective way to manage and lose weight. Try keeping an "emotional eating" diary, where you record what you eat and when you eat it each day, along with any feelings you experience at the time. You will become aware of how and when your emotions affect your eating patterns and food choices.
- **Get Support From Professionals.** A counselor or registered dietitian may be able to help you handle any emotional or eating issues that surface.

Reference

Dallman, M.F., et al. 2003. Chronic stress and obesity: A new view of "comfort food." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 100 (20), 1696–701.

courtesy of

Coach Ken Johnson
www.3-fitness.com
coachken@3-fitness.com

Sponsored by **Propel**
Official Water of IDEA