Many women discover gaining weight around the menopause appears to be inevitable. In fact, this is so common that it has its own term in the English dictionary: middle-age spread. But there are strategies that can effectively tackle the dreaded spread of middle age.

**BODY-SHAPE CHANGES**

Menopausal hormone changes can't simply be dismissed, as these are linked to an increase in body-fat mass and redistribution of fat to the abdomen. Even if weight remains stable, as women pass through the menopause they tend to shift from a 'pear' body shape towards an 'apple' shape. Studies have measured this change using hi-tech scans. Fat around the abdomen is most closely linked to your risk of developing heart disease or diabetes.

**PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**

Physical activity guidelines from the World Health Organisation (WHO) suggest that healthy adults aged 18 to 64 should do at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity per week. This can be broken down into shorter bouts of activity, with at least 10 minutes of sustained activity in order to gain health benefits.

Resistance exercise (strength training) helps to retain muscle and prevents declining lean body mass. Aerobic activity is easy to achieve – going out for a brisk walk, mowing the lawn or swimming at a rate that leaves you slightly out of breath are all classed as moderate activity. Resistance training, however, can be more challenging, as this needs to be done correctly.

**MENOPAUSAL SYMPTOMS**

Losing weight can help to ease some menopausal symptoms. Studies have shown that reductions in body weight, BMI (Body Mass Index or weight versus height) and/or waist circumference have resulted in a reduction in the severity and/or frequency of hot-flush symptoms during the menopause.

**PREVENTING WEIGHT GAIN**

- Choose foods rich in vitamins and minerals: fruit and vegetables, lean meats and wholegrain foods.
- Consume regular meals: this helps to avoid snacking.
- Control your portion sizes: increasing portion sizes are likely to be a factor contributing to the rise in obesity.
- Decrease your intake of energy-dense foods: those that are high in fat and/or sugar and low in fibre.
- Limit your intake of sweetened drinks and fast foods.
- Reduce your television viewing to less than 10 hours per week, as this has been linked to weight loss.

**TAKE ACTION**

In essence, the message is simple: the menopause will tend to cause your waistline to thicken, so if you can no longer fit into clothes you used to wear, now is the time to challenge yourself to change this.

Make a commitment to take some form of physical activity for at least 30 minutes each day. Maybe try something new and fun (eg, aqua fitness, line dancing, Zumba or badminton.

Check that you are eating at least five portions of fruit and vegetables per day, and watch the portion sizes and treats. Instead of hopping on the scales, pull out your tape measure and check your waist measurement. If the size of your waist is greater than 34in (88cm), now is the time to take action.

Angie Jefferson is a dietician and a member of The Menopause Exchange, a group of professionals devoted to increasing our understanding of the menopause. The Menopause Exchange: 020-8420 7245, www.menopause-exchange.co.uk