

Why do women gain belly fat in midlife? And can diet or exercise help?

A thicker midsection is common as women enter their late 40s (men usually see this earlier in life). Is there any way to target it?

If you're a middle-aged woman and you're noticing that your midsection is expanding, the first thing to know is that you're not alone.

"This is a physiological change that, unfortunately, really happens to virtually all women as we age," said Victoria Vieira-Potter, an associate professor of nutrition and exercise physiology at the University of Missouri. "It's not something you did," she added, or an indication that you're letting yourself go, so to speak.

In the years leading up to menopause, Dr Vieira-Potter said, levels of hormones like estrogen shift. And research suggests that these shifts likely lead to changes in body shape, she said — along with hot flashes, mood changes, irregular periods, trouble sleeping and more. This perimenopausal transition, which typically begins between 45 and 55 and lasts for about seven years, officially ends one year after the last period. At that point, women are said to be in menopause.

Before the menopausal transition, women tend to store more of their body fat in the

thighs and hips, resulting in a "pear-shaped" body, Dr Vieira-Potter explained, while men tend to store more fat in the abdominal area, making them more "apple-shaped."

But around menopause, there's a striking change in where women store fat on their bodies, said Dr Gail Greendale, a professor of medicine at the David Geffen School of Medicine at the University of California, Los Angeles. In one 2021 study, for instance, Dr Greendale and her colleagues tracked how the bodies of 380 middle-aged women in Boston and Los Angeles changed over 12 years, including the time before, during and after their transitions to menopause. While the results varied according to race and ethnicity, the overall outcome was that around menopause, the women started storing fat more like men — less around the thighs and hips and more around their midsections.

For example, among the white and Black women in the study, there was no net change in their hip and thigh fat over the 12 years, but their midsection fat increased, on average, by 24 and 17 per cent, respectively. They gained midsection fat most quickly during the few years before and one year after their final period.

In other words, Dr Vieira-Potter said, women "start to adopt that apple shape instead of the pear shape." It's also common for men to gain more fat in their midsections as they age, but it is a slower and steadier change. "There's no analogous thing in men where an organ just goes 'Later!' and shuts down," Dr Greendale said, referring to women's ovaries during menopause.

According to Dr Greendale, researchers don't know exactly why these shifts in fat storage occur. But while normal, they are something to keep an eye on, she added. Increases in belly fat — and in particular, the type of visceral fat that sits deep inside the abdomen and surrounds the organs — have been linked to certain increased health risks, like of heart disease, diabetes and cancer.



This fat, which can expand not only with menopause, but with stress, lack of exercise, poor diet and more, is the "troublemaker fat," Dr Greendale said. On the other hand, fat stored in the thighs and hips, creating the so-called pear shape, seems to protect against diabetes and heart disease. Despite the ubiquitous internet ads claiming to hold the secret to shrinking belly fat, experts really don't know how to address the waistline expansion associated with menopause, Dr

Greendale said. Researchers are only just beginning to understand how and why the body changes in this life stage, and she's careful not to promote a solution without evidence that it works. "What worries me is that women who are trying to do right by themselves and keep up their exercise habits and eat a good diet may feel defeated" if their belly fat doesn't budge, she said. "They may be doing everything they can, and their central fat may just have a mind of its own." Ex-

cessive dieting and exercising too much can also be harmful, she pointed out. That said, getting at least 2.5 to 5 hours of moderate physical activity per week has been shown to help prevent heart disease and diabetes, both conditions associated with increased abdominal fat. Following a healthy diet — including one that incorporates plenty of fruits, vegetables and whole grains.

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The incredible story of this 19-year-old who flew around the world in 155 days



She could have started college. Instead, she spent five months flying more than 32,000 miles across five continents.

"My name is Zara Rutherford, a teenager," she told the internet after leaving Belgium in August. "I'm attempting to fly solo around the world," she said, aiming to be the youngest woman to do so.

Rutherford, 19, dodged giant clouds in Colombia and lightning flashes in Mexico. In Alaska, her tiny plane was grounded for weeks by bad weather and a visa delay.

That was all before the British and Belgian aviator crossed a frozen, desolate patch of Siberia. Before China barred her from its airspace. And before smog scrambled her route across India.

As delays piled up, Rutherford fell more than two months behind schedule. But she didn't quit. When she landed in the Belgian city of Kortrijk on Thursday, she

became the youngest woman to circumnavigate the globe solo. Supporters lined up on the tarmac to show their support and welcome her home.

"I didn't expect a 19-year-old to beat my record," Shaesta Waiz, an Afghan American pilot who set it five years ago at the age of 30, said earlier. "It just goes to show that it doesn't matter what your gender or your age is; it's all about determination."

In August, as Rutherford flew across the Atlantic Ocean, clouds forced her to fly as low as 1,500 feet. She could not fly through them because her plane, a two-seater that is only about 22 feet long, was not certified to fly on instruments alone.

When she landed in Greenland after losing radio contact for several hours, she sent her parents — her mother is a recreational pilot; her father, a professional one — a two-word text message: "I'm

alive."

She later said she assumed the going would get easier in North America. It didn't.

In Florida, she manoeuvred around thunderstorms in the middle of hurricane season. As she was flying to Seattle in September, wildfire smoke seeped into her cockpit over Northern California, clouding her view and forcing her to turn around.

She faced challenges on the ground, too.

In North Carolina, she made an unplanned landing at a remote airfield because the daylight was fading. It was so tiny that no one was there when she arrived. A taxi company in the nearest city would not pick her up, so she hitchhiked.

In Nome, Alaska, she had to wait several days for her Russian visa to be renewed. Then, bad weather kept her there for a few more weeks.

Rutherford said she was touched by the kindness of strangers she met along the way, including the man who hosted her in Alaska even though his family had just welcomed a newborn.

"When I left, his daughter was 5 weeks old, so I was there for over half her life," she said.

Rutherford, who said she plans to study electrical engineering or computer science in college and wants to be an astronaut, has also received moral support from other female aviators.

At a stop in Florida, Waiz greeted the teenager and offered tips on dealing with adversity. And in Goose Bay, Newfoundland and Labrador, Capt Erin Pratt, a search-and-rescue pilot with the

Zara Rutherford recently became the youngest woman to circumnavigate globe solo — and even stopped in Singapore, where she was delayed due to a flat tire. Here's her story.

Canadian Armed Forces, gave the flying wings that she had worn every day for seven years to Rutherford as a gesture of solidarity.

Flying any distance in a single-engine plane is a challenge for any pilot, Pratt, 34, later said in an interview. Doing it throughout a round-the-world journey at low altitudes is exceptionally brave, she added.

"I look at that, and I'm like, girl, you are fierce," said Pratt, who became a pilot at 16 and joined the Canadian military at 18. "That is amazing."

Belgium-British teenage pilot Zara Rutherford holds up her certificates after landing her Shark ultralight plane at the Kortrijk airport in Kortrijk, Belgium, Thursday, Jan 20, 2022.

Rutherford said in August that she was under pressure to reach northeastern Russia by late September to avoid the onset of bad weather. She ultimately crossed Siberia in early November — at a time when ground temperatures were as low as minus 31 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 35 Celsius).

On one flight over a remote area, she said she saw airfields where she could, in theory, have made an emergency landing. But they were covered in snow.

From Russia, where bad weather stranded her again for a couple of weeks, Rutherford had planned to cross into the Chinese mainland. So when China barred her from its airspace as a coronavirus protocol, she had to fly more than six hours over water toward South Korea.

She was finally able to land in South Korea as planned, but her itinerary was soon upended again by a low-pressure system linked to a typhoon in the Philippines.

—New York Times

How makgeolli, a rice wine made by farmers, became cool again in South Korea

Jeong Mi-hee, a South Korean businessperson, used to buy a lot of whisky in airports. When the coronavirus pandemic brought her travels to halt, she started paying more attention to local booze she had overlooked.

The best drink she found was makgeolli, a cloudy Korean rice wine with a slightly sour taste. Jeong liked it so much that, after studying ancient fermentation techniques with a master brewer, she decided to start her own label.

My makgeolli life started with coronal!" Jeong, 41, said recently at a Seoul liquor store dedicated to traditional Korean alcohol.

Jeong is among a growing number of South Koreans who have started brewing makgeolli for the first time, and one of many people around the world who developed an interest in homebrewing during the pandemic.

South Korea's craft makgeolli revival has been underway for at least a decade, but the drink's popularity took on new dimensions during COVID-19 lockdowns as people ordered small-batch labels online and swapped brewing recipes on social media.

"Making makgeolli helped me pass the time when I couldn't leave the house much because of COVID-19," said Lee Young-min, 35, a makgeolli aficionado in Seoul who posts about traditional foods and liquors on Instagram. "Learning the ingredients of traditional foods and makgeolli is part of understanding the world that our ancestors inhabited."

Jeong Mi-hee, the founder of Mi Hee Makgeolli, taking pictures of her rice wine brand at a Seoul liquor store dedicated to traditional Korean alcohol. (Photo: Chang W Lee/The New York Times)

Makgeolli, also known as makkolli, is made from fermented rice and nuruk, a doughlike starter. The brewing process can be as complex as that of Belgian-style beers or natural sake, said Alice Jun, a makgeolli producer in New York City who has studied the craft in Seoul.

Koreans have been brewing makgeolli at home for centuries. The drink was banned during a brutal, 35-year Japanese occupation of the Korean Peninsula that ended in 1945. Some makgeolli production resumed after fighting in the Korean War ended in 1953, but it was suppressed again as the government in Seoul grappled with postwar grain shortages.

In the 1950s, officials urged producers to use potatoes, not rice, to make soju, another type of traditional Korean liquor, according to a recent book on soju by Hyun-hee Park, a history professor at the City University of New York. In 1965, they banned grain-based alcohol entirely, further suppressing traditional distillation methods.

Koreans have been homebrewing makgeolli for centuries. —The New York Times.

This ancient brew has become a cosmopolitan sensation over the past decade. The buzz grew during COVID-19 lockdowns.

