

The York University Staff Association Health and Wellness News and Views

If you started taking in more calories than usual or cutting back on exercise, you wouldn't be surprised if the numbers on the scale crept higher. Most of us have been there - at the scale wearing nothing but our birthday suit and an unhappy expression due to the unexplained jump in numbers. It's unfair and unacceptable, and makes us feel powerless to control our weight. It's time to delve deeper into what else might be going on. Anything from hormonal imbalances to stress to vitamin deficiencies to prescription meds to lack of sleep can hold clues to what's making you gain weight. Whether its hormonal, a medication side effect or something else, too often we put the onus on ourselves.

If you're trying to slim down, you've probably consumed a menu full of calorie-cutting tips and tricks. So it may come as a shock to learn that many of the ones you've sworn by may be actually causing you to gain weight. In the quest to lose weight many of us unknowingly sabotage ourselves. Slashing significant calories might sound like the fast track to weight loss, but it's likely to backfire. In fact, nutrition experts recommend you don't dip below 1,200 - 1,500 calories a day depending on your health and lifestyle. In reality, your body adapts, and compensates for this low calorie intake by descending into survival mode, and tries to store everything you eat, meaning you'll never burn fat. In fact you will lose muscle, especially if you haven't been exercising. I'm not saying that suddenly switching to a high-calorie diet of donuts and pizza is going to get you shredded, but eating vitamin packed nutrient-dense healthy foods may well be the answer to your fat loss prayers.

When it comes to body weight, it may be that if you snooze you lose. When your short on sleep it's easy to lean on a large latte to get moving, you might be tempted to skip your workout, too tired... and get take-out for dinner. Not only does skimping on sleep set your brain up to make bad decisions, it also leads to changes in hormonal levels, increased hunger and appetite. Some studies suggest that sleep deprived people have reduced levels of leptin, the chemical that makes you feel full and higher levels of ghrelin, the hunger-stimulating hormone. So if you're trying to slim down or shape up, hitting the sack is just as important as sweating at the gym.

When life's demands get too intense, our bodies go into survival mode. Cortisol, the stress hormone is secreted

which causes an increase in appetite, pushing people to turn to food as a coping mechanism. At the same time you get a burst of adrenaline, which taps stored energy so you can fight or flee. This combination is the perfect breeding ground for weight gain. Why not power out some push-ups? Moving your muscles is an effective instant stress reliever. It actually fools your body into thinking your escaping the source of your stress. Exercise makes your blood circulate more quickly transporting the cortisol to your kidneys and flushing it out of your system.

Another cause for unexplained weight gain is hypothyroidism. If your thyroid (the butterfly-shaped gland in the front of your neck) is not producing enough hormones, you're probably feeling tired, cold and weak. An underactive thyroid (hypothyroidism) can play a central role in regulating metabolism making seemingly "unexplained weight gain" more likely. Even a thyroid functioning at the lower end of the normal range might cause weight gain. People with hypothyroidism may not realize their thyroid levels are low because the symptoms often mimic things we typically associate with aging, like hair and skin changes, sore muscles, lack of energy etc. If you are experiencing any of these symptoms seek professional advice. Most often this condition can be controlled and is treated with daily hormone replacement tablets, called levothyroxine.

Some very common medications can also lead to weight gain - prescription drugs used for mood disorders, diabetes, high blood pressure and seizures can all add unwanted pounds. For many drugs, it is not known exactly what causes the weight gain. Some medications can increase appetite, cause fluid retention, or slowly lead to weight gain over a period of time due to fatigue and lower activity. Steroids also known as corticosteroids, are used to treat a variety of conditions. Long term use of steroids seems to increase appetite, leading to weight gain. This is because steroids make you feel hungry, affecting the areas of the brain that control feelings of hunger and satiety (the fullness centre). While some medications are more common than others to add pounds, not all patients gain weight from every drug that lists weight gain as a side effect. It is not a good idea to reduce or stop any medication. If you are concerned about weight gain, chat with your doctor about help to control your weight.

Extra pounds don't always equal fat, but are sometimes due to fluid retention and/or bloating. Fluid retention

(oedema) causes parts of the body to become swollen, which translates into weight gain. Water retention is often the culprit when 2-5 pounds mysteriously appear on the scale overnight, and unfortunately water weighs heavily. Some types of fluid retention are not uncommon – for example, if your sodium levels are high or you've been standing for long periods or you are pre-menstrual? You may experience water retention from time to time. Swelling can occur in one particular part of the body, such as the ankles or hands, or it can be more general. More severe fluid retention can cause breathlessness, frequent or decreased urination, loss of appetite and fatigue. You should see your doctor if you are experiencing any of these symptoms as these examples of fluid retention can indicate heart or kidney problems that need assessment.

People begin to lose modest amounts of muscle as they get older, largely because they become less active. Muscles are an efficient calorie burner, so a loss of muscle mass can mean you burn fewer calories. If you're eating and drinking the same amount as you always have and are less physically active, this can lead to weight gain. To reduce muscle loss, you should stay active and try to do regular muscle-strengthening exercises. As the body ages, the metabolism also slows, as the ageing metabolism is much like all things as they grow older. It just isn't as efficient as before. The good news is that studies indicate that older people who have a little padding tend to live longer and healthier lives. Having that bit of extra weight may be nature's way of saving life should a sudden illness settle in.

Losing/maintaining a healthy weight isn't the easiest thing in the world to do, and if there is an underlying reason that is causing the weight to increase unexpectedly or to stubbornly persist, it can be more challenging, even for the most disciplined person. Weight is not completely dependent on behavior alone, as there can be several contributing factors. Several things in life are out of our control. My advice... Control the things you can. Listen to your body, make healthy food choices and stay active.