

# Battle of the bulge - or what the middle age spread means to you

It's that time of year when our screens and magazines are filled with ads for weight loss, but do boot camps and diet fads really lead to a happier retirement? ANGELA BENSTED investigates.



**W**hether it's meal plans, gym memberships or the latest exercise gadget, people are looking to cash in on new year's resolutions to trim down.

For many of us who've reached a certain age, the kilos have crept up and lingered, stubbornly refusing to budge despite daily walks and fewer sweets.

The escalating number on the scales shouldn't come as a surprise to us, however, according to Dr Cam McDonald, a registered dietitian and exercise physiologist who specialises in epigenetics.

"Our metabolism naturally slows down after our mid-30s," Cam says. "We

also start losing muscle and bone tissue and have a propensity to gain more fat as a result."

He says our metabolism generally slows down as our lives are at their busiest, compounding the challenge.

"We're usually hitting the peak of our professional career after 30. We start having kids and losing time and reprioritising things," he says.

"By the time we hit 50 or 55 where potentially those things are less demanding, we've been out of action for 15 years and it feels like a much longer road to get back on track."

For retirees who are working less and playing more, it's tempting to ignore the

tape measure and just have another glass of wine.

Surely there's a point when we can throw away the bikini and stop agonising over a few extra inches around the waist?

Aside from the well-documented health risks of being overweight, dietitian Rachel Moore from Obesity Surgery Brisbane says people coming to the practice have lots of motivating factors for shedding a few kilos, and none of them involve a swimsuit.

She leads a team of dietitians supporting people through bariatric surgery, a procedure that physically reduces the size of a person's stomach to limit eating.

"We see a lot of people who've reached mid-life and want to take control of their weight," Rachel says. "Often, they're empty-nesters. They might be newly single and looking to change their lives in a radical way."

Rachel says a lot of men want to stop snoring to get a better night's sleep and often they need to lose weight to see improvements.

"All they need to lose is a couple of centimetres off their neck," she says.

"Maybe five kilos can make a difference."

One woman was motivated by becoming a grandparent.

"Her daughter was pregnant with twins and had to go back to work fulltime," Rachel says.

"The woman was only about 10 to 15 kilograms over weight but she knew she had to lose it to be a help to her daughter."

For other mid-life patients the battle with weight is new and unexpected.

"Some women survive breast cancer, only to face life 20kg heavier thanks to steroids and hormone treatments," Rachel says.

While some people are turning to surgery and other means to limit their food intake, it's not only what we put in our mouths that makes a difference. Exercise plays a critical role in physical and mental wellbeing, regardless of how heavy we are.

Mid-morning on a weekday at a West End gym, the usual crowd of young athletes has left the building.

In their place, a rowdy gang of retirees in vibrant shorts and t-shirts is training under the watchful eyes of physiotherapist Zenna Leung and Patrick

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Daley, an exercise physiologist.

This \$10 community fitness class, which starts with strength work at the gym before moving to a riverside park for tai-chi, is the brainchild of head physiotherapist at Inspire West End, Dorothy Hawkins.

"Maintaining and building muscle strength and flexibility is really important to assist with and prevent injury and is also a key factor in weight management," Dorothy says.

"But for various reasons, not everyone is comfortable in a standard gym setting."

She introduced the class last year as an affordable group fitness option and is encouraged by its growing popularity.

Four regulars shared their stories over coffee after class, singing the praises of the small-group approach.

Di Oliver, a self-confessed gym-junkie who's exercised all her life, appreciates the personalised treatment in a group setting.

While the trim 68-year-old doesn't have a weight issue, she's seen real improvement in mobility since she started.

"The trainers have seen me come in with significant pain in my hips and knees to now doing an exercise that they've structured especially for me.

"They can see the improvement," Di says, "and now I can get through a workout fairly easily."

Her golf game's improved too, with one point knocked off her handicap.

Di and partner Garrett Russell, 70, a retired TV and film producer, say their young trainers are respectful without being patronising.

"They don't bark at us to 'give me another 10!'," Garrett says, "but they do push us to increase our weights if they think it's too easy for us."

Ron Petersen agrees.

The 75-year-old retired architect had never exercised with weights before.

After six months of weekly classes he's increased the weight he holds for free-standing squats from 8kg to 15kg.

"I don't see much of a difference when I weigh myself," Ron says, "but my pants fit much better."

More importantly, he's built up his strength.

Ron had open-heart surgery five years ago and started walking regularly afterwards as part of his rehabilitation.

The walking stopped when he was struck down with rheumatoid arthritis, "blowing up like the Michelin man", and found himself reduced to sitting in a chair with no muscle tone.

***"We've been out of action for 15 years and it feels like a much longer road to get back on track"***

He says joining the community class with wife Trish was a good way to get back in the exercise saddle.

"You go along and you have a damned good laugh," Ron says.

"Apart from the social side of things, I just feel better within myself. And I'm much stronger."

Trish Petersen has been a gym regular for three years, motivated by painful bursitis in both hips to get stronger and lose weight.

"I kept going because I wanted to travel and I wanted to do lots of walking," Trish says.

"I was really in a lot of pain and I couldn't lie on my side. Now it doesn't worry me at all and I sleep well at night," she says.

"There's still inflammation but it doesn't worry me because I've built up my glutes and my quads."

The group agrees they enjoy the tiredness that comes from exertion.

"Sleeping is better when you've exercised," Di says, "and so is your diet."

"You exercise and so then you enjoy having a salad and fish or whatever, knowing that's part of your fitness routine."

So is the secret to weight loss and wellbeing as simple as eating less and moving more?

Not according to Dr Cam McDonald who now runs the Australian arm of ph360, an online platform providing personalised wellness plans.

He says not everyone will respond to generic exercise recommendations.

"Even though people are putting in the effort it's actually not directed in a way that's suited to their body," Cam says.

His research in epigenetics suggests everyone is hardwired to respond to various motivations differently.

"For one person it might be tracking their knee range of motion by degrees whereas another person's motivation might be hearing that another person did it before them, which fires them up to take on the challenge," Cam says.

"Someone else might need nurturing and just to have someone to believe and be there with them."

He says personalisation is about learning what motivates people.

"It makes the conversation easier when talking about injuries or when people say they just can't change their diet because their family won't let them."

Regardless of the approach taken, Cam says it's never too late to tackle weight and wellness and 72-year-old Ron Petersen agrees.

"It's too easy to stop," Ron says.

"If you want a decent lifestyle then you've got to look after yourself."

## WHERE TO GO

**Queensland State Government**  
Get Healthy is a free phone support service for Queenslanders at risk of chronic disease. Personalised plans are provided by psychologists, nurses, dieticians and other health professionals.  
[gethealthyqld.com.au](http://gethealthyqld.com.au)

Healthier. Happier. is a website with articles, videos, tutorials and other resources to help Queenslanders live better.  
[healthier.qld.gov.au](http://healthier.qld.gov.au)

**Brisbane City Council**  
The Growing Older Living Dangerously (GOLD) program offers free or low-cost activities like aqua aerobics and Zumba at council pools, parks and halls.  
[brisbane.qld.gov.au/whats-on/events-listed-type/sports-recreation-programs/growing-older-living-dangerously](http://brisbane.qld.gov.au/whats-on/events-listed-type/sports-recreation-programs/growing-older-living-dangerously)

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