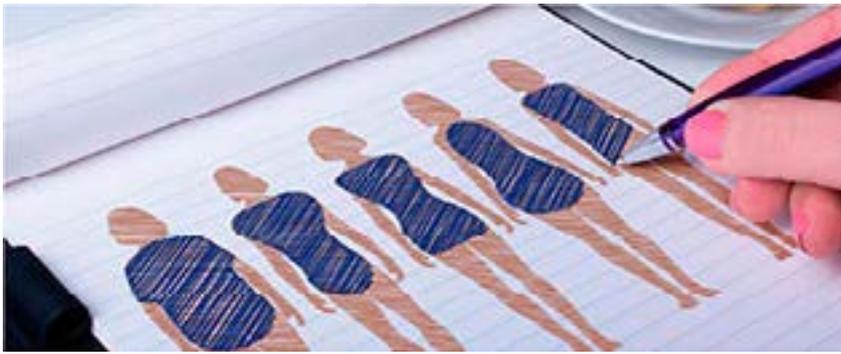


# Your changing body shape



How many times do we hear, “Oh it’s just her hormones making her crazy”, or “It’s that time of the month again!”? While hormones are often blamed for mood swings – and we know they play a big role in the menstrual cycle, pregnancy and menopause – what else are hormones responsible for?



## Pregnancy and post-birth

When a woman is pregnant, the fall of oestrogen and progesterone that usually happens at the end of the menstrual cycle doesn't occur, hence no period. Throughout pregnancy, hormones are released that soften the ligaments in the pelvis.

This softening helps to widen the birth canal and hips, and after childbirth also helps stimulate the production and release of breast milk.

After birth, it can take some time for your body to return to normal and there are some things that will never be the same. It takes between 6 and 8 weeks for your uterus to return to a pre-pregnancy size. While many women experience a decrease in the size of their breasts and a change to the size of their feet following pregnancy, one of the most noticeable, long term changes to your shape will be your hips. Hips may begin to move back into place in the weeks after giving birth, but the reality is they may never return to their pre-pregnancy shape.

## Hormones

Hormones are chemicals made in your body that relay messages through the blood stream. They help control many body functions such as growth, energy, the repair of cells, sexual function, reproduction, digestion and body temperature.

As women age, hormones can also impact the shape of the female body. Changes to breasts, hips, fat deposits, muscle and body shape often come with puberty, pregnancy and menopause.

Even though we might think we are in control of our body shape, often changes associated with hormones are outside our control.

Susan: "I always used to think I could just diet or walk more and the weight would go."

Cathryn: "It has gotten to the point now where I don't know what to do. I haven't changed the way I eat or the exercise I do, yet the fat has completely moved up towards my ribs and I have this pot belly that will not go, no matter what I do."

Sally: "After breastfeeding, my breasts shrank and dropped. Part of me doesn't mind because of the amazing job they did at the time!"

Could these all be the result of hormones?

## Younger years

The first significant change in a girl's body shape is during puberty, which usually starts between the ages of 8 and 13 and lasts for a few years. Hormones are released that stimulate the ovaries to start producing the female hormone oestrogen.

"The female body shape changes under the influence of oestrogen, working in combination with other sex steroid hormones and growth hormone", says Jean Hailes endocrinologist, Dr Sonia Davison.

These hormones cause a girl's hips to widen, and breasts to form. As her body changes from that of a girl into a woman, many girls will also notice an increase in body fat and a rapid growth in height.



### Tip:

Seek information on the changes that happen to your body as you grow. Understanding the role of hormones can be reassuring, particularly if you are worried by a sudden growth spurt.



### Tip:

One in three women who have had a baby will experience incontinence (bladder or bowel weakness).

Learn about and practice pelvic floor exercises. You will be very glad you did this when you next sneeze!



**Podcast** (Pelvic floor exercises)



**Jean Hailes Online** (Pelvic floor)

## Middle years

From the age of about 20, androgen levels (hormones such as testosterone) begin to fall, and as menopause approaches oestrogen and progesterone also lower. The effect on your body as these hormones change mean you may:

- Begin to lose muscle tissue – when you lose muscle, your resting metabolism begins to slow and you burn fewer calories and can begin to gain weight
- Experience an increase of fat tissues around the centre of your body, but the fat layer under the skin can reduce
- Process food differently – your insulin levels can rise and your thyroid levels drop, making it difficult to recognise when you are full
- Notice a difference in the way that fat is distributed around your body due to a decrease in oestrogen levels
- Experience changes to the density of your bones

“Many women are preoccupied with hot flushes and night sweats and trying to work out what is going on with their body changes during this time of their life”, says Jean Hailes endocrinologist, Dr Sonia Davison. “Oestrogen also plays a major role in maintaining bone mineral density and women lose about 2% of bone mass each year after menopause.”

### Tip:

For bone strength, try to include weight bearing exercises such as walking, tennis and climbing stairs. These activities force you to work against gravity, helping you to build up bone and muscle strength.

## Older Years

After the hormonal changes that come with menopause and as women get older, fat tends to stay around the middle and becomes increasingly hard to shift.

The effect of this on your body can have another significant impact. Dr Davison says, “A drop in oestrogen, weight gain – particularly around the waist – and a rise in cholesterol and blood pressure are also believed to be linked to increased risks of heart disease after menopause”.

It is not, however, all doom and gloom. As women age, they may feel frustrated by the changes to their body that seem out of their control, but they are also less likely to have negative body image.

Dr Mandy Deeks, Jean Hailes psychologist says, “Many women say at this time – ‘I have spent so long worrying about my body and what I look like; now it’s time to focus on other more important things like being healthy and taking time to enjoy life’”.

### Tip:

Try to have yearly health checks of blood pressure and blood cholesterol. At the same time discuss your bone health with your doctor. After the age of 70 a Medicare rebate is available for bone density checks.

**While there is little doubt that hormones cause changes to our body’s shape and function as we age, these are the changes that make us a woman. A woman’s body is capable of so many amazing things and hormones make a lot of this possible.**

