

Can breast cancer treatment make you fat?

# The Big Issue

*Weight gain is a reality for many women during breast cancer treatment – yet it is hardly acknowledged by healthcare professionals. Now, we can help you understand why those pounds pile on and how you can shift them.*

So, is it true – does breast cancer treatment make you fat? “Yes!” say huge numbers of *Amoena Life* readers. “Perhaps,” say the experts. According to Cancer Research UK, for example, fewer than one in ten people put on weight while they are taking tamoxifen. Well, here in the *Amoena Life* editorial nerve-centre you could have knocked us down with a feather – because if readers’ letters are anything to go by, it would seem that the real statistic is far higher.

Peggy Mellers is just one of a number of readers who have told us of their frustration with post-treatment weight gain. She was in her mid-seventies when diagnosed, so it could not be claimed that being slammed into an early menopause was responsible. “Before my cancer operation I was a size 14. After commencing tamoxifen my dress size increased to 16 and then 18, even though there was no change in my diet,” she says. Peggy eventually gained nearly two stone. She watches her diet, carefully monitoring fat intake, partly because her partner has had a triple heart-bypass, yet still the weight refuses to budge.

Another reader who is finding that extra two stone difficult to shift is Victoria Clark. Since her treatment in 2003, which included a long spell on Arimidex, she has gone up to a dress size 20 and, despite coming off the drug over a year ago, has not lost any weight. At one of her annual check-ups, Victoria asked her medical team what could be causing the problem. “My GP just shrugged and said, ‘That’s what happens,’ while at the hospital one doctor told me, ‘It’s better than being dead.’ No-one gave me any help or advice.”

## *Middle-age spread – fat or fiction?*

Even without the disruption of breast cancer treatment, many women find that as they reach middle-age, they can’t get away with eating as much as they used to without putting on a bit of weight. Often they first notice this extra poundage around their midriff.

Although it is highly frustrating, this tendency is quite natural, says the UK’s leading nutritionist specialising in women’s health, Dr Marilyn Glenville. “Women need oestrogen to maintain healthy bones. At the menopause, whether it is induced or natural, the body will try to make oestrogen to replace that which is lost when the ovaries stop working. It can do that by placing extra fat cells around your middle to act as a manufacturing plant,” she explains.

“Because of this, in some ways, when you want to stay slim you are fighting against your body’s natural tendencies,” continues Dr Glenville. “It’s also why women often gain weight during breast cancer treatment, particularly if they are on anti-oestrogen drugs.” At last, proof that we weren’t imagining it, and a logical explanation for the weight gain so many women experience while taking hormonal therapies.

Experts also acknowledge that chemotherapy can trigger weight gain, as the steroids often given as part of the treatment can slow down your metabolism. Sometimes taste buds can be affected, too, and the tendency is to eat more – whether to combat the bad taste, or to load up on foods that still taste good.

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” Peggy Mellers

Exercise is also known to play a part. While many of the women we speak to are convinced that their treatment contributed to a marked weight gain, they also accept that for a while they were a lot less active. For some, there is also a permanent change of lifestyle, which can make a difference over several months. If you’ve gained weight, you’ll probably acknowledge that some of these factors are partly to blame, but take some deep breaths and relax, because getting stressed about it could be the last thing you want to do.

## WAIST-TO-HIP RATIO

To get to this figure, grab your calculator and divide your waist measurement by your hip measurement. For example, if your waist measures 30” and your hips are 42”, your waist-to-hip ratio is 0.71, which is healthy.

## *Too stressed to be slim?*

Conjure up an image of an anxious person in your mind’s eye. They’re probably skinny with all that worry, aren’t they? But according to Dr Glenville, stress is another factor in the body’s hoarding of fat stores.

“The stress of diagnosis and treatment can lead to weight gain, because cortisol, the so-called stress hormone, can affect what you eat,” she explains. “Basically a body under stress wants to keep a fat store in order to protect itself. If we were fighting for our lives, this would be very beneficial in a famine situation.” Not so great, though, if you just want to look good in your jeans.

So, our hormones – natural or artificial – are against us; our age is against us, and even being stressed can make us fat. You could be forgiven for wondering if there was any hope for your waistline at all. Thankfully, though, there is a way, and it’s all about balance. You’ll also be pleased to know you can forget faddy diets once and for all, and running marathons isn’t the answer either.

## *A new attitude to food*

As we’ve seen, putting on a little fat around the middle is the body’s way of maintaining bone density as we get older, or when oestrogen is scarce. Some women may feel content to get a little plumper, while others are determined to return to their pre-diagnosis weight. Whatever you decide is right for you, it’s vital to be sure you’re still healthy. You can do this by keeping an eye on your waist-to-hip ratio, which should be under 0.8 (see left).

It’s important to remember that we’re dealing here with very ‘active fat’. Dr Glenville says that it functions like a gland in itself, producing hormones that







change your appetite and influence the food choices you make. So at least you know you weren't imagining those carb cravings!

For women who've had breast cancer, of course, another concern with this type of fat is the possibility of recurrence. With the majority of breast cancers being oestrogen-receptor positive, it makes sense to have as little of this oestrogen factory around your middle as possible. The challenge is, how?

### Stop dieting!

Some women are determined to do all they can to shift the bulk, even if it takes several attempts. For example, professional diet and fitness instructor Hilary Richardson should be the last person to find herself struggling to lose a stone while taking tamoxifen but, she says, "Trying to shift even an ounce is such a constant battle!" Hilary, who teaches eight exercise classes a week and advises women on how to maintain a healthy weight, will remain on tamoxifen for another year. "I do feel it has made a difference to me," she says. Now around half a stone heavier than her pre-diagnosis weight, she applies all her knowledge to her own situation but, she says, "it takes so much longer. I used to be able to lose 3lb in a week, but now it takes weeks just to shift one pound!"

If your experience has been like Hilary's, here's some sound advice from Dr Glenville. "This fat won't respond to normal 'dieting', which can actually make things worse. If we cut calories or restrict fat intake – particularly with 'crash' or extreme dieting, we can lose muscle and water as well as fat. Although this looks good on the scales, it will come back pretty quickly as fat as soon as we return to our old eating habits." It's back to that cavewoman thing – if you drastically cut the amount of energy you consume, your body thinks there's a famine so it will hold onto those fat stores around your middle. "Relying on this type of dieting can result in the need to eat less and less, while still struggling to lose the tummy fat," warns Dr Glenville.

What we want to do is get the body to stop trying to hold onto the energy we consume, but to use it instead. "That means boosting our metabolism and sending the body the message that it's OK to let go of this fat. The key is eating several small meals throughout the day, and eating the right foods. The body then knows it is safe and not in a famine."

What are 'the right foods', though? Dr Glenville's book, *Fat Around the Middle*, is the bible here. It contains detailed information, together with advice, recipes and food plans.



The rules, however, are simple. "Eat breakfast, lunch and dinner, together with a snack mid-morning and mid-afternoon. You shouldn't be eating more than normal, just the same amount split up into smaller servings. And always have breakfast. Women think that by skipping breakfast they are saving on calories but it just doesn't work, because the body thinks you're

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Dr Marilyn Glenville

starving it." Without getting too technical, the aim is to slow down the body's absorption of the energy available from the food you eat, so you feel fuller for longer. It's essentially a low GI (glycaemic index) eating plan.

A typical example of a day's menu might include porridge, muesli or an egg on wholemeal toast for breakfast; soup, omelette or wholemeal sandwiches for lunch; fish with lots of vegetables for supper. Snacks should consist of fruit and nuts or wholemeal crackers.

For most people, the main meal of the day is supper. To ensure you don't undo the good you've done all day when you sit down to your evening meal, Dr Glenville advises: "If you're trying to lose fat, cut out the starchy carbohydrates altogether, but otherwise add some brown rice. A good replacement for rice is quinoa, which cooks up just like rice but is actually a protein. Vegetarian meals are also delicious and very good for you – nuts and seeds in a stir-fry provide great protein and plenty of 'healthy' essential fats." Dr Glenville also warns against eating carbohydrates (e.g. potatoes, pasta, bread, rice) after 6pm if you're trying to lose weight.

What about puddings, though? Brace yourselves, girls – Dr Glenville's advice is to cut them out. "If you must have something sweet to round off your meal, eat some fruit. It does contain sugar but combining seeds or nuts with your fruit portion helps slow down the hit on the bloodstream, so the feeling of fullness lasts longer."

Protein and 'good' fats help stop you getting hungry shortly after a meal. If you're on the go and want to reach for something ready-made, you could check out the new Simply Fuller Longer range from M&S, formulated with high protein and balanced carbohydrate content. "We want to avoid energy highs and lows that can lead to reaching for sweet or fatty foods," explains Dr Glenville. "Absolutely key to success, though, is to see it as a way of eating that becomes a way of life."

### Eating for life

So the good news is that we won't be talking about 'dieting' ever again. And we won't have to count calories, either. "It is not the calories, it is the impact on the blood sugar that makes a

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Hilary Richardson

difference," says Dr Glenville. But surely we won't have to do without our treats? For some of us it's crisps and for others it's chocolate, but we all love them. The rule here is that a little of what you fancy can't do that much harm. "Aim to eat well 80 per cent of the time, either across the week, or some women have a 'cheat day' when they can eat what they like." This is not as disastrous as it may sound – apparently women find they don't

go as mad as they thought they would on 'cheat' days. "Because they've allowed themselves to do it, it's OK," says Dr Glenville. "Binges are more likely to happen if you deny yourself completely."

What we drink is as important as the food we eat – soft drinks contain a lot of sugar, as does alcohol. "My advice is to cut out alcohol altogether while you're losing weight, and dilute your fruit juice with water. Smoothies are a better way of having fruit juice, as they also contain all the fibre from the fruit." Water is the best bet – it provides the hydration your body needs and helps you feel full.

But as a nation of tea-drinkers and one that has been converted to the joys of great coffee in the past few years, must we also give up our caffeine fix? We all know that our daily latte or cappuccino ramps up the fat intake with oodles of milk, but Dr Glenville sees the caffeine as the major evil: "With caffeine comes the release of those stress hormones again, which can lead to weight gain. My advice is to look at tea and coffee as a treat – perhaps for weekends only. If you have a fair amount

of weight to lose, try and have a break from it. Herbal and fruit teas are a great substitute."

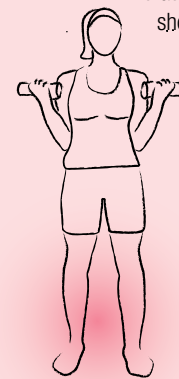
If you're feeling fired with enthusiasm now that you possess the knowledge that could offer the key to being healthy and svelte, but you're wondering where to start with it all, don't worry – it's easy. First, a couple of 'don'ts': don't weigh yourself, and don't go by your Body Mass Index, which is only your weight-to-height ratio and doesn't measure body fat. Instead, focus on losing fat. "As we get older, we lose muscle. It's harder for women because we don't have as much as men in the first place – our bodies keep hold of fat to help us with reproduction. Either do your slimming by using a tape measure – muscle takes up five times less space than fat, so if you're getting leaner and fitter your measurements will reduce – or buy some bathroom scales or a handheld device that measures your body fat percentage. You can buy these at Boots and online at Amazon.co.uk. Your ideal body fat percentage is between 20 and 27."

## RESISTANCE WORKS!

*Here are some simple resistance exercises you can do at home – remember to check with your medical team before undertaking any exercise, and build up slowly. Stay relaxed and breathe steadily throughout the exercises and aim to do your resistance work two to three times a week, with a rest day in between each session.*

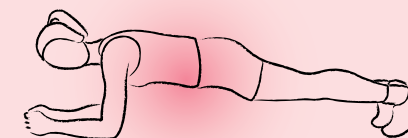
### Biceps curls

**Helps keep your upper arms in shape.** Holding a small hand-weight in each hand (or a tin of baked beans or similar!), stand with your feet at hip distance apart and your knees very slightly bent. Look straight ahead. Start with your arms held straight by your sides, with the elbows 'soft'. Keeping your elbows level with your waist, slowly bend your elbows and lift the weights so that your hands curl in towards your shoulders. Then slowly lower them again, taking care not to 'lock' your elbows when you extend your arms. Start with ten slow repetitions and gradually build up to three sets of ten.



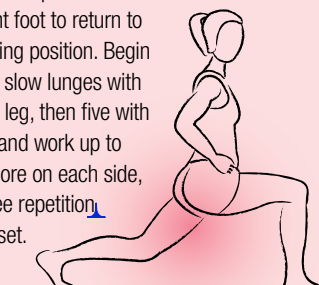
### The plank

**This Pilates-based exercise is great for your back and stomach.** Start by lying straight out on the floor, on your stomach. Curl your toes forward for support and then raise your body up off the floor, putting your body weight onto your forearms, fingertips pointing forwards, elbows bent and in line with your shoulders. Your body should be in a straight incline going upwards from your feet to the top of your head (i.e. don't 'sag' at the waist or stick your bottom in the air!). Hold this position for a slow count of 5-10, then gently lower, or bend your knees onto the floor to release. Repeat up to three times, gradually building up to a slow count of 20 for each repetition, as you get stronger.



### Lunges

**Great for keeping your rear in trim!** Start by standing with your feet at hip width, arms by your sides or hands on your hips. Take a fairly big step forward with your right leg, transferring your weight forward, but don't lean forward with your upper body. Place your right foot flat on the floor (your left leg should still be extended out behind you, toes on the floor). Bend your right knee as you 'lunge' your weight forward, and you will find that your left knee bends towards the floor as you lower your body weight. Then push back with your right foot to return to the starting position. Begin with five slow lunges with the right leg, then five with the left, and work up to ten or more on each side, with three repetitions of each set.



# The Big Issue

The other vital component is exercise. For Dr Glenville, it's simple: "Resistance exercise is essential to raise your metabolic rate and burn fat." Resistance work used to be called weight training, but banish those images of sweaty men with bulging muscles: quite simply, resistance is about using your muscles to make your bones move around – usually with the help of added weights or sometimes using your own body weight (as in press-ups or squats).

"It's not something women are drawn to automatically," admits Dr Glenville. "Go to most gyms and you'll see women on the treadmills and men using the weights. But it will improve your body shape, increase your metabolism and shift the weight faster because you'll be putting on more muscle, and muscle is metabolically active." That means you'll use up more energy – even at rest! Dr Glenville can't stress this strongly enough: "We still need to do aerobic activity for heart health, but to shift the weight it is resistance that does it fastest."

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Confused? Don't be. Just think gentle bicep curls with hand-held weights, push-ups, squats or lunges, stomach crunches and Pilates-based exercises. Videos and books abound, or go to your local gym for advice. They'll happily give you an induction to explain the equipment and will create a personalised programme just for you.

Dr Glenville also advises topping up with supplements. "I believe they can be very useful, helping balance your blood sugar and address any additional needs caused by the menopause or your medical treatment." She has formulated a specially-designed range (NutriPlus and Amino Plus), available from [www.naturalhealthpractice.com](http://www.naturalhealthpractice.com) or after a personalised consultation at one of her clinics in North London or Tunbridge Wells. "I usually recommend a three-month course while a

Dr Glenville's...

TOP TIPS

1.

**Don't skip breakfast!** – not only is eating breakfast essential for healthy blood sugar balance, but research from the University of Nottingham has found that skipping this vital meal can raise cholesterol levels too, as well as increasing insulin sensitivity, both of which could lead to weight gain in the long term.



2.

**Eat little and often** – you need to send your body a message that it doesn't have to hold onto fat stores because you're not going to starve it. Eating small amounts of healthy foods every 2-3 hours during the daytime will help get this message across, encouraging your body to burn the energy rather than store it.

3.

**Raise your metabolic rate with resistance exercises** – aerobic exercise is great for your heart and lungs, but to raise your metabolic rate (even at rest, whoopee!) you need to work your muscles. That means lifting small weights, using resistance machines at the gym or just using your own body weight. Again, little and often is the key to success. And don't worry – with small weights you won't build huge muscle bulk!

woman sorts out her food and exercise regime, to get her on the right track." She also believes that the right supplements can help prevent a recurrence: "Vitamin D has featured quite a lot in breast cancer research recently. We have always known it was important for bone health but over the last couple of years it has come out as important for ageing, heart disease and breast health. The problem is that we are manufacturing less of it because we are staying out of the sun and using more sun block, so taking a supplement is a good idea."

### Boning up

Talking of vitamin D brings us back to bone health, which was really where we started, because now we know that fat around the middle is the body's way of helping our bones stay strong as we get older. After age 30, you'll steadily lose bone mass, and following the menopause the rate of loss speeds up to a 2 per cent reduction each year. To avoid osteoporosis, then, maintaining bone density is vital for all women.

And it's at this point that we can feel really smug about our new knowledge, because the type of muscle-building, fat-busting resistance exercise that Dr Glenville advocates also helps to build strong bones. So this way, not only does your body have no more need to hold onto that fat, but your new eating and exercise regime for life will help keep your skeleton strong.

An answer to the eternal puzzle of middle-age spread, which is also the bugbear of so many women following breast surgery; a solution that involves not starvation but healthy eating, and not exhaustion but 'smart' exercise that also makes you stronger and helps ward off recurrence... food for thought, isn't it? \*



## Resources

Dr Marilyn Glenville PhD is the UK's leading nutritionist specialising in women's health. Dr Glenville is the past president of the Food and Health Forum at the Royal Society of Medicine and a registered nutritionist. She is also the author of a number of internationally bestselling books including *Fat Around the Middle*, *New Natural Alternatives to HRT*, *Overcoming PMS the Natural Way*, *Osteoporosis – How to Prevent, Treat and Reverse it*, *Getting Pregnant Faster*, and her latest book *The Natural Health Bible for Women*. Dr Glenville has clinics in Tunbridge Wells and London.



For more in-depth information look on Marilyn's website [www.marilynglenville.com](http://www.marilynglenville.com). If you are interested in a consultation you can contact Dr Glenville's clinic on 0870 5329244 or by email: [health@marilynglenville.com](mailto:health@marilynglenville.com). If you would like a vitamin D test or to order the 'Lose your Belly' NutriPlus and Amino Plus supplements mentioned above, go to [www.naturalhealthpractice.com](http://www.naturalhealthpractice.com).

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