



Sport and exercise nutritionist James Collins, left, pictured in Regent’s Park

On my way to meet James Collins at his Harley Street clinic, I duck into a high-street sandwich chain for lunch. It’s gone midday and I’m an office worker, so naturally I’m feeling a) hungry, b) even more hungry because I didn’t have time for breakfast this morning, and c) panicked because I’m running late. Fortunately, I’m well trained in this particular emergency. I know exactly what to do. I grab a chicken and avocado sandwich (one of my five, right?), a mango smoothie (mark that up as two), and a chocolate brownie (a reward for previous good decision making). Then I scoff the lot in the time it takes to travel two stops on the Tube. Later, feeling guilty and a bit heavy, I tell Collins, a leading nutritionist with more than 15 years’ experience, about my preparation for our meeting. “That was a high-carb, high-fat, high-energy lunch,” he says gently. “It would be wrong to say that’s a bad lunch, per se. If you’re doing exercise later, what you’ve eaten is quite functional. You’ll have plenty of fuel to burn.” My problem is I have no intention of exercising later. Like 41 per cent of office workers in Britain, I spend less than 30 minutes a day on my feet at work; and when I get home, family commitments and the lure of the sofa trump gym sessions and brisk walks. I’m not alone in getting it wrong. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, one in every four adults in Britain is clinically obese, and

‘Forty-something professionals realise they’re not where they used to be. They’re feeling fatigued and they’re getting ill a lot’

that ratio is projected to rise to one in every two by 2050. No wonder we’re known as the Fat Man of Europe. The trend for biting off more than we can burn is particularly acute among the ‘midlife’ generation. Public Health England recently established One You, a campaign that is aimed at the 83 per cent of 40- to 60-year-olds who are either overweight or obese, exceed the weekly alcohol guidelines, or are physically inactive. Collins, a sports and exercise nutritionist by training who has worked with Team GB athletes and now looks after Arsenal footballers, says these midlifers are starting to comprehend their situation. “Over the last four years, I’ve noticed more and more people coming to my practice who are not sports people. We’re talking forty-something professionals who have realised that they’re not where they used to be. Their feeling fatigued, they’re getting ill a lot, they travel and they come back exhausted. “Ten years previously, they’d have been interested in nutrition but not ready or willing to act on it. Now, they’ve hit midlife, they are successful at work, and the light bulb’s switched on. They want to improve their health.” Collins says there are two fundamentals he teaches clients. Firstly, that what you eat has a direct effect on your body; and secondly, that physical activity is essential to keeping your machinery in good working order. “Exercise is the king, nutrition is the queen. Focus on one and you miss half the puzzle.”

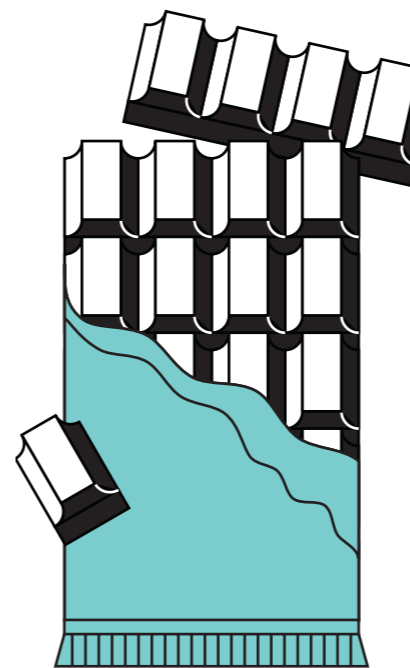
jamescollinsnutrition.com

1 HOW IS MY BODY CHANGING IN MID-LIFE?

Exercise is important to everyone because it burns calories that would otherwise be stored by the body as blubber. However, it becomes even more important as we grow older. Once we hit our 30s, our bodies naturally tend towards atrophy: our aerobic capacity decreases, our organs get smaller (that includes the brain), and our muscles shrink and lose strength due to a process called sarcopenia. Essentially, we get less efficient – which is why you might suddenly feel a tweak in your hamstring when mucking around with the children in the garden. Regular exercise slows this decline. By putting strain on our muscles and bones, it forces our bodies to make new, fresh, healthier, happier cells. Good nutrition smooths the process. Think of your body as a car sitting on the drive; use it every day and it will keep ticking over smoothly; leave it for weeks at a time and inevitably things will start to go wrong.

2 IS MY MIDDLE-AGE SPREAD UNAVOIDABLE?

“A spare tyre”, “insulation for the winter”, “bought and paid for” – we have a lexicon dedicated to selling midlife, midriff fat in friendly terms. It’s false advertising, says Collins: “We should never think of excess fat as a safety net. It’s a dangerous thing.” The middle-aged spread is



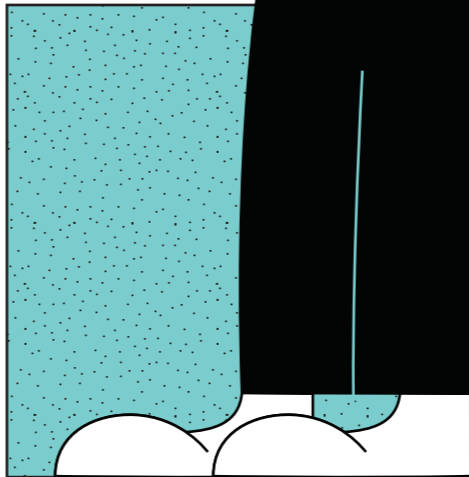
particularly worrisome because it takes the form of visceral fat – a gel-like substance that wraps itself around organs and increases your risk of suffering coronary heart disease, diabetes, and a stroke. Any willingness to embrace it, says Collins, indicates a misconception about health. “I work with people in their 70s who are in great shape, and that’s how it should be. Your 40s and 50s aren’t the natural end of the line.”

3 HOW CAN I TELL WHETHER I’M CARRYING TOO MUCH FAT?

Previously, you might have stepped on to your bathroom scales once a week in order to monitor your weight. Now, that’s not enough – and the reason goes back to that fat gathering around your waist. As muscle is heavier than fat, you could hit the gym for a month, lose some of your belly, gain muscle, and still put on weight. “Bathroom scales mask the real changes happening in your body,” says Collins. Instead, focus on your body composition – particularly your body fat percentage, which indicates the amount of your overall weight that is comprised of fat. This can be accurately measured using bioelectrical impedance, skinfolds or a DEXA scan (ask your doctor, or a registered professional). A midlife man should aim to be under 20 per cent fat, a woman slightly higher.

4 I’M CARRYING TOO MUCH FAT. SHOULD I GO ON A DIET?

“There are loads of fashionable diets out there, but ultimately a lot of them are based on a calorie deficit,”



FIVE STEPS TO A BETTER YOU

James Collins’s five-step guide to improving your midlife nutrition

COMMIT TO A GOAL

1 Whether you are planning to run 10k or just want to get lean and healthy, you need a target to work towards. Involve friends, family and colleagues – their support will be vital.

GET ACTIVE

2 Make it fun by doing the activity you enjoy. Try a fitness class with a friend, or find a personal trainer who can plan a programme for you to follow at home.

UP THE PROTEIN

3 Muscle strength and mass reduces with ageing. Keeping protein regular, alongside exercise, ensures that the muscles can keep building new tissue. Include protein with each meal as a starting point.

KEEP IT VARIED

4 Over time, we develop narrow eating habits. By eating a variety of foods, you will naturally increase your nutrient and micronutrient intake.

PLAN AND REFLECT

5 Don’t bother recording everything you eat. Instead, take 20 minutes each week to reflect on what you’ve eaten over the past seven days. Go to a different environment (e.g. coffee shop) and fully engage – this will allow your habits to keep developing.

ILLUSTRATION: CHRIS NEWELL FOR THE TELEGRAPH; PHOTOS GETTY/ANDREW CROWLEY FOR THE TELEGRAPH

says Collins. “You eat less than you expend in energy. Yes, that works in the short term – but you end up dead at work. You have no energy and you can’t get through eight hours of quality work, or go to a function in the evening. Where’s the point?” He advocates a more considered approach that matches your input against your output in a way that is sustainable. “A lot of people are still getting the energy balance all wrong. They’re overeating. It comes down to working out how much fuel the body needs, and then giving it the right fuel at the right time.” Again, a motoring analogy helps here. “It’s like looking at a car journey: work out the destination and then calculate how much fuel you need to get there.”

5 SHOULD I EAT BREAKFAST?

Midlifers may have grown up with the mantra that breakfast is “the most important meal of the day”, but in recent years a number of experts have stepped forward to argue that we shouldn’t, in fact, be eating anything at all in the morning. According to those who espouse the benefits of intermittent fasting, by reducing the number of daily meals from three to two (leaving around 16 hours of ‘fasted’ time in every 24 hour cycle) the body will burn its stored fat for energy, helping you to stay lean. Collins believes that some fasting can be good, but cautions against dropping breakfast from your daily routine. “Having an appetite in the morning is no bad thing. Breakfast gives your body and brain energy for the day. “Overeating at night is a much bigger problem, especially among office workers. We run out the door with a piece of toast, snatch a sandwich for lunch, get home starving and gobble a huge dinner. It’s a back-to-front day.”

‘IN MY EXPERIENCE MIDLIFERS DON’T THINK ABOUT PROTEIN. IT WASN’T A TALKING POINT WHEN THEY WERE GROWING UP’

6 ARE CARBS EVIL?

“Carbs have become a dirty word,” says Collins, making reference to the low-to-zero carb diets that have gripped the dieting industry over the past ten years. “We’ve got to take a step back and understand that physiologically, carbohydrate is really important to create a fuel for us to move our muscles, and for our brain to function during the day.”

As one of the three macronutrients (alongside fat and protein), our bodies struggle to operate without a carbohydrate source of energy. However, we convert carbs into glucose so quickly that it’s easy to consume more than you can burn – and unused glucose is stored as fat. For the midlifer, the situation becomes worse. Once in your 40s, your metabolism starts to slow down, which means that you are less good at using up that glucose. Essentially, you need less – but still some – carbs than you did before, though you may not have realised.

Collins says the midlifer can adopt two easy ‘fixes’ here. First, eat ‘low GI’ carbs – quinoa, wholegrains, porridge oats, brown not white rice, rye not white bread – which release their energy slowly.

And second, consider a low-carb dinner if you know you aren’t going to exercise that evening.

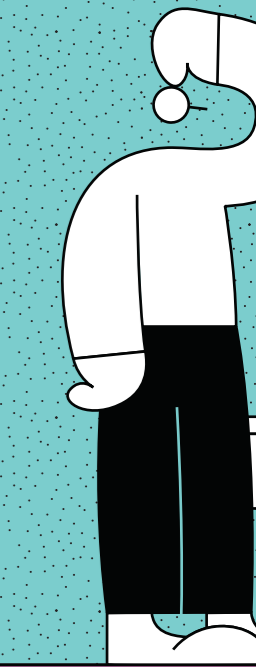
7 ARE FATS FRIENDLY?

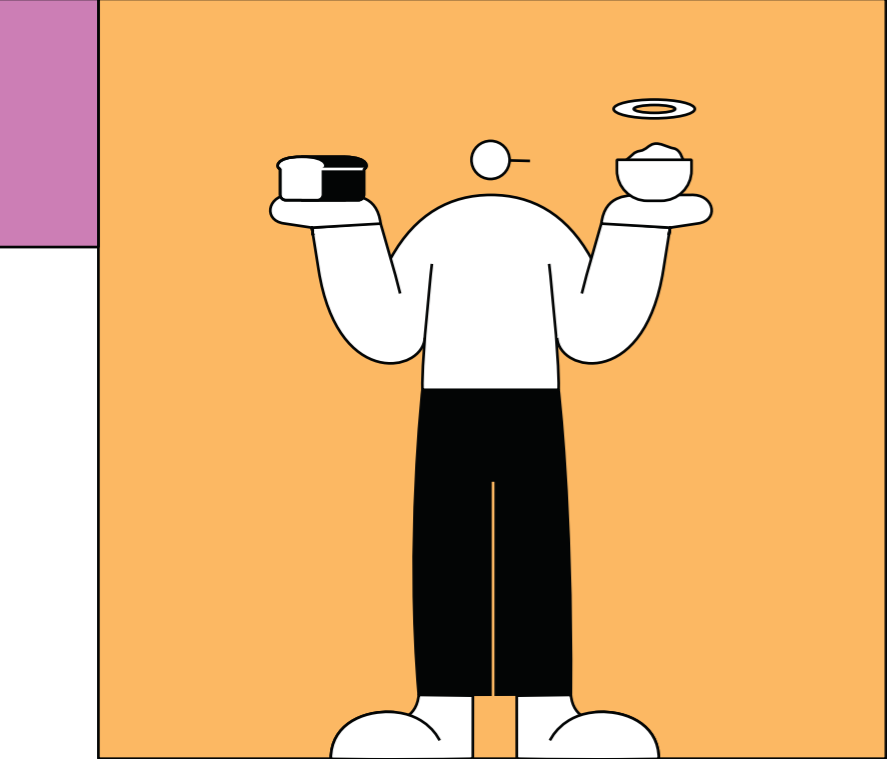
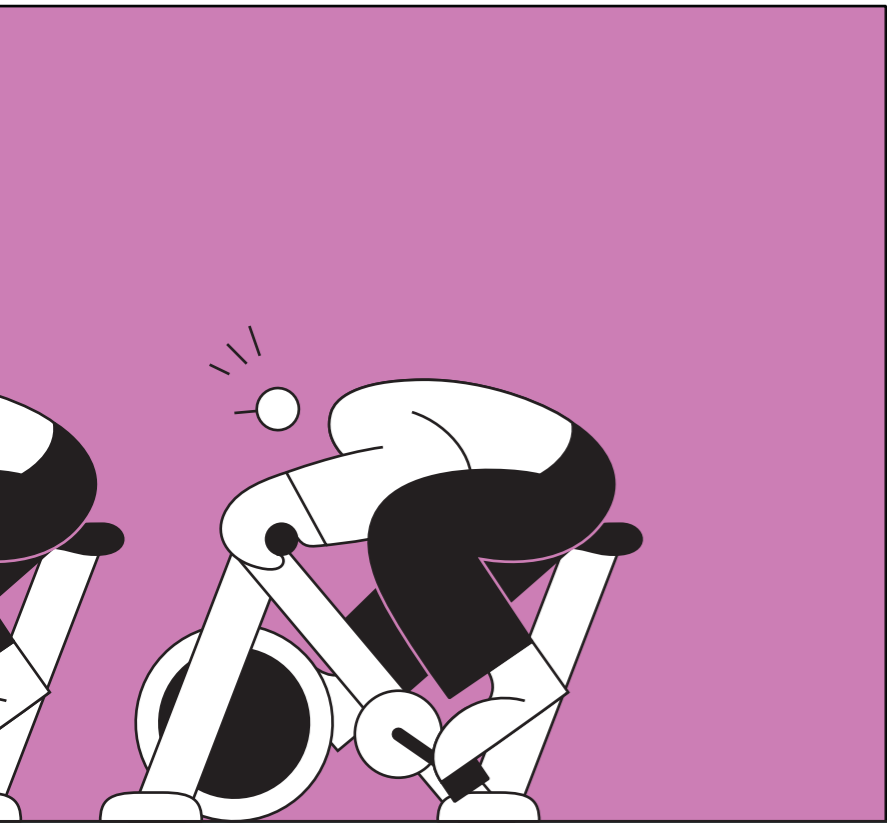
While carbs have become the dieting industry’s bête noire, fats have undergone something of a renaissance. Last year, the National Obesity Forum and the Public Health Collaboration called for a “major overhaul” of dietary guidelines that suggested consuming a low-fat diet to minimise weight gain. “Eating fat does not make you fat,” their report said.

Collins points out that fats are a useful fuel for our body. But there is a distinction to make: “We want to steer people towards polyunsaturated fats,

which are found in fish, avocados, olives and seeds. These improve our brain health, our cardiovascular function, and there’s evidence that they have an anti-inflammatory function in the body, which is very useful for midlifers.”

At the same time, midlifers are encouraged to limit their





9 IS CAFFEINE BAD FOR ME?

Good news, folks. That morning, mid-morning and lunchtime cup of tea or coffee can stay. If anything, says Collins, it's a good thing. "Caffeine helps. It helps our cognitive processes, it helps our feelings of how stressful exercise or work feels. And contrary to the myth, it doesn't dehydrate you."

Sadly, that doesn't necessarily mean those mid-afternoon, late afternoon, and in-front-of-the-TV cups are beneficial too.

"Our sensitivity to caffeine is highly individual, so there are two things to consider. The first is timing. If you're having problems with sleep, you need to work backwards and find your cut-off point. The second is strength. Be wary that this varies dramatically across high street brands of coffee. One cup might contain 90mgs, another 180mgs". The current daily safe limit for most people is 400mgs.

10 IS FIVE-A-DAY STILL THE TARGET?

Collins winces as soon as I say the words. "We've had the message for years. It's too generic. More recently, we've had two pieces of research that have said seven-a-day and ten-a-day. It makes nutrition unachievable."

He prefers an approach that recognises any improvement: someone stuck on two portions a day should look to increase that to three, rather than shy away completely because five is unobtainable.

Moreover, he says, the five-a-day mantra obscures one of nutrition's most current and interesting eddies of research, into the benefit of individual fruit and vegetables.

"There's research that shows dietary nitrates, found in celery, spinach, rocket and beetroot, can reduce blood pressure. That's amazingly useful for a midlifer with hypertension. It's the same with the antioxidants in cherries, blueberries, rocket and onion. Research is showing that these repair damaged cells and keep them healthier. They're anti-ageing."

11 SHOULD I JUICE TO UP MY COUNT?

One way to get more fruit and veg is to whack a handful in a Nutribullet and chug it in one go. Sadly, the benefits of 'juicing' are overplayed, says Collins, because it breaks down the fibre in the whole fruit. "Fibre slows the digestion of food, so it keeps us feeling fuller for longer. The satiety is essential. If you don't feel full, you eat more."

12 SHOULD I BE TAKING SUPPLEMENTS?

In a manner of speaking, juicing is like taking supplements: a shortcut to paper over a hole in your diet. Midlifers are often short on omega 3, iron, calcium and certain vitamins, all of which can be obtained from supplementary pills. "I'd say try to get it through your diet first," says Collins. "Supplements can fill a gap, but their use needs to be targeted."

He also stresses the frequently poor level of quality control around the products. "With athletes, any supplements we use have to be independently screened. Often, we find that what's on the label isn't actually there. Five years ago, we screened 630 supplements and 15 per cent contained positive substances that would have elicited a doping violation. Samples contained prohormones, glass and rat faeces."

13 CAN I EVER EAT CHOCOLATE BARS AGAIN?

They're high in sugar and trans fat – and they're also absolutely delicious. What can we do? "With midlifers, because they tend to under-fuel during the day and overeat at night, I'd say if you are going to have a chocolate bar, have it early in the day. An hour or two before exercise would be best."

That doesn't mean Twixes and Mars start smelling of roses, however. "There are a lot better sources of fuel. This is damage limitation. One day is too many."

If you do need a treat a day, seek out Bounce Balls or Pulsin Bars, says Collins.

These offer a healthy energy kick with added protein. Greek yoghurt is a good alternative for desserts – "but watch out for

THE MIDLIFE SHOPPING GUIDE

How to give your basket a healthy makeover

SLOW-RELEASE CARBOHYDRATE (FOR FUEL)

Quinoa, buckwheat, farro, amaranth, wholegrain pasta, basmati rice, freekeh, rye bread



GOOD FATS (FOR BRAIN AND HEART HEALTH)

Salmon, tuna, trout, mackerel, sardines, flaxseed, canola oil, walnuts, sunflower seeds.



FUNCTIONAL FRUIT & VEG (FOR ANTIOXIDANTS AND NITRATES)

Fruits: Kiwi, apple, blueberries, cherries, pomegranate, cranberries, blackberries, grapes.

Vegetables: rocket, spinach, beetroot, celery, lettuce, radishes



HEALTHY HERBS & SPICES (FOR ANTI-INFLAMMATORY BENEFITS, BLOOD SUGAR CONTROL AND APPETITE REGULATION)

Garlic, coriander, turmeric, ginger, cinnamon, capsaicin



POSITIVE PROTEIN (FOR BUILDING NEW MUSCLE)

Free-range eggs, low-fat Greek yoghurt, semi-skimmed milk, chicken, turkey, prawns, cod, lentils, chickpeas, kidney beans



saturated fat intake, found in animal products such as red meat and cheese; and trans fats, found in shop-bought pastries, cakes, biscuits, and pies.

These can cause a rise in the type of cholesterol that contributes to fatty build-ups in arteries and is linked to an array of health issues. Polyunsaturated fats, in comparison, help to lower our levels of this kind of cholesterol.

8 SHOULD I WATCH MY PROTEIN INTAKE?

If carbs and fats deliver fuel for the daily exertion of life, then protein, the third macronutrient, helps us to recover from that exertion. It is the reason why our muscles don't wither to nothing as soon as we use them.

"In my experience, midlifers don't think about protein," says Collins. "It wasn't a talking point when they were growing up."

And yet protein is particularly important for that very age group because of sarcopenia – where muscles lose mass and strength with age. It's why the Government now recommends everyone does resistance training (weight lifting): by putting your cells under stress, it forces them to maintain strength, repair and regrow with the aid of protein.

Try to get your protein from a variety of sources, including dairy, fish, nuts and pulses.

As for meat, chicken and turkey is good; beef should be limited to once or twice a week.

Collins recommends a serving of protein with every meal – and that includes breakfast. "So many people have toast and jam in the morning," he bemoans.

"There's no protein there. Just add a serving of low-fat Greek yogurt alongside the toast, maybe with some mixed berries.

"The breakfast hasn't changed on its head, but it's more functional."

Sadly, the benefits of juicing are overplayed, says Collins, because it breaks down the fibre in the whole fruit

