

The secret sci-fi retreat for women who can't lose weight: JANE ALEXANDER investigates the spa that tells women to stop dieting and eat five meals a day to shed the pounds

- Jane Alexander was told she needed to lose 3st at 13st and with a 38in waist
- Her stress hormones were high, a common occurrence in middle-aged women
- She went to the Euphoria Spa, and ate 5 times a day, and lost 4lbs in a month

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When I was 14 my mother put me on a diet. 'You've got skinny arms and legs,' she said. 'It's a shame you've got a fat tummy.'

At 5ft 8in, I weighed just over 9st, the perfect weight for my height. Nevertheless, I starved myself to lose a stone — which is how all my weight issues began.

Inevitably I put that stone back on and then some. By my 40s, after years of yo-yo dieting, I weighed 14st. So I joined the women in the loos before Weight Watchers' meetings, hoping to pee out an extra ounce before weigh-in. But the needle on the scales kept moving on up.

Then I discovered the magic combination of fasting and extreme exercise. Not eating is easier than dieting, I found. Add in three hours of exercise a day and, by heck, the weight just evaporates.

I dropped nearly 4st in six months, giddy with excitement, until I developed gall stones (a common side-effect of sudden weight loss). Even that didn't stop me.



Jane Alexander pictured with Marina Efraimoglou, the owner of the Euphoria spa in Peloponnese in mainland Greece. She lost 4lbs after her visit to the spa

However, the day I nearly passed out in the fast (ho ho) lane of the motorway from low blood sugar was the day I reluctantly stopped fasting. The weight galloped back. When I wailed about my fat, my GP shrugged. 'It's genetic,' she said. It seems I was born to be fat around the middle.

I sized up spas like a junkie grabbing the next fix. I went on juice-only fasts and boot camps so tough I vomited.

Yes, I lost weight, but inevitably, it came back. I knew that not only my weight but my whole relationship with my body and food itself, was messed up.

Then I heard about Euphoria Retreat, billed as the new 'It' spa for women who can't lose weight.

Set in the Peloponnese in mainland Greece, it offers something it calls the Nutrigenomics programme. Headed by molecular nutritionist George Leon, it looks at what is going on in your body, down to the cellular level. It centres on the new field of epigenetics: how nutrition and lifestyle can influence how our genes are expressed. Could I possibly override my 50-something body's insistence on keeping me fat around the middle?

It sounded suitably scientific and was reassuringly, if eye-wateringly, expensive. So, a few weeks later, I found myself sitting in a small room in Greece having enough blood to satisfy Dracula taken from my arm. My entire biochemistry was being put under the microscope. Next stop was the gym, where I was strapped into a harness, given a mask to put over my face, and set to work on the cross-trainer. This apparently would show how my metabolism was functioning, and what fuel my body was using.

Antonia Vasilakou, the resident nutritional therapist quizzed me on my eating habits. I told her I had super-charged porridge for breakfast. 'That's great,' she said. 'And lunch?' Um, a few slices of toast maybe. She looked less impressed. 'Supper?' I mumbled into my hair. 'Er... porridge?'

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Antonia strapped on electrodes to measure my fat. I got on the scales and winced. I was nudging 13st and my waist was 38in.

Antonia passed me on to George Leon and his colleague, Dr Ioannis Charizanis, a specialist in metabolism. I felt like a naughty schoolgirl.

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'You have basically skinny arms and legs,' said Dr Leon. 'But your middle is storing fat.' Tell me something I don't know. However, the next part brought me up sharply.

My fat tum was putting my health and even my life at risk. I'd always known abdominal fat wasn't a good thing, but I had stuck my head firmly in the sand.

Weight really isn't the major factor here — it's how wide your waist is. Anything over 35in for women (and 40in for men) indicates you are likely storing potentially dangerous abdominal fat.

This stuff huddles around your organs and is linked to serious conditions, including heart disease, cancer and dementia. The doctors explained that abdominal fat cells effectively make up an entire organ of their own, secreting hormones and other biochemicals.

Then they showed me my blood results, the alarming parts blaring out in red, like a bad school report. The next hour passed in a daze as they bombarded me with a biochemistry lesson.

It transpired that I didn't just have too much fat — I had too much of everything. My raft of conditions had alarming names and all began with 'hyper' (too much): hypercatecholaminic syndrome, hyperlipidaemia, hyperuricemia. Roughly translated, I had way too many stress hormones, way too much cholesterol and too much uric acid. My liver was 'exhausted'; my immune system was on its knees.



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therapy, from chakra balancing to acupuncture. Jane was prescribed meditation and yoga to reduce stress levels and massage to help tease the tension out of her body

If I went to my GP, they said, I would probably be prescribed statins and be warned I was on the way to becoming diabetic.

My porridge habit wasn't helping, but it wasn't all down to diet. High cortisol (a stress hormone) had led to my insomnia which was partly to blame for my stressed liver. The knock-on effect was poor management of glucose and poor fat metabolism which leads to weight gain.

Apparently it's a common picture in midlife women. A high proportion of us are living with permanently elevated stress hormones, and exhausted livers.

We turn to diets in an attempt to get rid of fat but that just makes the problem worse by interfering with our metabolism.

Leon reassured me that, while it wasn't a pretty picture, I could pull myself back on track. 'Our health is in our hands. It's a matter of choice,' he said. 'We can start to reset this in days.'

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It was more than I've eaten in my life. Breakfast was omelette with salad or porridge with nuts and berries. Mid-morning I drank a superfood-rich smoothie for antioxidants. Lunch was soup, then salad followed by grilled fish or chicken with vegetables.

Mid-afternoon was a protein cookie or yoghurt with fruit. Supper was a palm-sized piece of protein plus veggies.

So no pills, no potions? 'We customise the diet to the specific needs of each person,' Leon said. 'We use specific foods rather than supplements. It's the safest, simplest, healthiest way.'

It was blissfully non-faddy. Just the good old Mediterranean diet but in precise portions.

I thought my comeuppance would come at the gym but, again, no. Vasilis, the personal trainer, appraised me. 'You are tall and your arms and legs are skinny but ...' Yes, yes, I know.

He prescribed an hour of brisk walking per day (my dog will be happy), plus sessions at the gym three times a week — a combination of aerobic exercise on the treadmill and bike, with light strengthening work.

So far, so sensible. Yet Euphoria isn't the average medi-spa. Its owner, Marina Efraimoglou, had her own serious health scare — a cancer diagnosis which sent her to explore the world's most potent tools for self-transformation and healing.

So, alongside no-nonsense medical advice and gym programmes, Euphoria offers everything from watsu (akin to shiatsu, the Japanese massage, conducted in water) to floatation therapy, from chakra balancing to acupuncture. I was prescribed meditation and yoga to reduce stress levels and massage to help tease the tension out of my body .

A session of ThetaHealing was also on my schedule. A mix of meditation and visualisation, it explores how emotional energy affects our health. I had been sceptical yet an interesting story arose in my session. Therapist Katerina took me back, following the trail of my memories.

I'm not quite sure how, but she put me in a relaxed state, akin to deep relaxation.

The at a glance guide to the Euphoria Plan

Everything at Euphoria is tailored for each person. However, there are general guidelines for healthy weight-loss which can be followed at home by every midlife woman.

1. Eat three main meals a day plus two (or even three) snacks. The aim is to eat every 3-4 hours. It's not a case of grazing throughout the day.
2. Main meals should be balanced with protein, green vegetables and small portions of complex carbohydrates (wholemeal pasta, noodles, bread). Think of the classic Mediterranean diet. A portion of protein is around the size of your palm.
3. Eat healthy fats every day — oily fish, avocado, olive oil, nuts, seeds. Avoid sugar if possible.
4. Snacks could be a protein smoothie; a small portion of yoghurt with fruit; a handful of nuts. Always have a little protein (nuts and seeds for example) alongside fruit (to prevent spikes in blood sugar).
5. STAY well hydrated. Sip water throughout the day, rather than glugging it. Adding chia seeds to your water bottle can make you feel more full.
6. Incorporate exercise into everyday life. A brisk walk for an hour is great. Gym sessions are fine, but don't over train as it puts stress on the body. Mindful yoga is good (pick a gentle class such as hatha or yin).
7. Learn stress management techniques (high levels of stress hormone cortisol stop the body burning fat). A simple meditation practice (try apps like Buddhify) can help. Also

practise abdominal breathing (as you breathe in, focus on your belly pushing out; as you breathe out, let it deflate). This engages the parasympathetic nervous system (the rest and repair cycle).

8. Get a good night's sleep to balance your hormones and reduce stress levels.
9. Avoid alcohol. It not only puts on calories but stresses the liver and interferes with your sleep patterns.
10. Avoid fasting as it can stress the metabolism.

It started like a psychotherapy session, with Katerina asking me what I'd like to change. Initially I said I wanted to be more assertive. Was that, she wondered, linked with anger? She then asked me to remember the earliest time I hurt someone by expressing anger.

I recalled an incident when I was a child when I crossly pushed my friend, who fell down a flight of stairs, concussing herself. Katerina asked what I felt and I replied: 'Guilt.'

When she then asked me to think of the first time I felt guilt, I found myself imagining being in the womb. My mother had miscarriages and abortions, and I realised I felt guilty about the siblings that hadn't made it. Tears fell down my face and, strangely, I felt a sense of fear as I realised that, for me, the womb wasn't a safe place.

And so it transpired that the 'script', or pattern, that runs my life is a deep lack of security — I don't feel safe; I am scared there won't be enough. Apparently it started not just in childhood, but the womb itself.

Sound wacky? Research shows trauma can be passed down in utero and even affect our genes. My mother had not only lived through the rationed war years but, before I was born, she suffered malnutrition. Could my embryonic self have started storing fat in a misplaced effort to stave off starvation?

It was an interesting theory, but I had enough on my plate. I'd been warned it was quite likely I wouldn't lose weight at first, as my metabolism adjusted to the new way of eating, but I still felt forlorn when, on my last day, I hadn't lost a single pound.

'It's not a quick fix,' said Marina. 'The work really starts when you get home. Some people even put on weight at first but, in the weeks that follow, it starts to regulate.'

The Nutrigenomics plan doesn't end as you walk out the door. You stay in touch for three months, checking in with the resident nutritionist and doctors via Skype and an online platform which tweaks your dietary and exercise guidelines.

Back home I struggled. The meal plans are precise and cooking them felt like a full-time job. Breakfast might involve an omelette made with two egg whites and one yolk, mushrooms and peppers, with 40g of avocado and a 30g gluten-free roll; lunch might be or 100g of grilled tuna with salad (containing cabbage, 50g of shredded carrot and a tablespoon of pine nuts).

Also, eating so much food after a lifetime of depriving myself made me feel uneasy. I realised my greatest battle was going to be with my mind.

Nearly a month on, I have lost 4lb and an inch from my waist — it's slow but healthily steady.

I think back to my meeting with the doctors at Euphoria. I had muttered something about willpower and psychology.

Leon was having none of it. 'It's a matter of priority really,' he said. 'If you want to kill yourself, it's your choice.' Ouch.

I had gone to Euphoria hoping for a magic bullet that would melt away my flab. Instead I had been given home truths and read the riot act. It wasn't a case of losing weight to look better in a swimsuit. It was about turning around my health.

We tend to think of spas as places of sybaritic beauty treatments and languorous massages. But Euphoria might just be the spa that saves your life.

- **A 7-day Nutrigenomics retreat (plus 3-month post-programme plan) at Euphoria Retreat costs from £4,695 (healingholidays.co.uk)**