At first glance, Victoria Vieira-Potter and Jaume Padilla seem to have little in common. Padilla studied exercise science in Spain — where he’s from — and in Belgium before finishing his doctorate and postdoctoral work in exercise physiology and vascular biology in the United States. Vieira-Potter hails from the Boston area and studied nutrition before joining the College of Human Environmental Science’s Department of Nutrition and Exercise Physiology (NEP) in 2012.

Almost as soon as they met, however, something clicked between the two researchers.

Padilla was finishing his postdoctoral work in the Department of Biomedical Sciences when Vieira-Potter joined the faculty full-time. Vieira-Potter was researching how the loss of ovarian hormones might inflame fat tissue, which can lead to cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes in postmenopausal women. In studies on lab rats, Vieira-Potter began to show a link between weight gain and the removal of ovaries — she attributed the weight gain not to increased eating but to a lower metabolism that resulted from estrogen loss. However, rats that exercised and were fit before their ovaries were removed seemed inoculated from the weight gain and its detrimental side effects. The implications are obvious: that healthy exercise regimens may protect postmenopausal women from weight gain and its further complications.

“Soon after I started research here, Jaume approached me and introduced himself,” Vieira-Potter recalled. “He was finishing his post-doc work and he wasn’t even on faculty yet, but he was excited and wanted to collaborate as soon as possible.”

Padilla’s research centers on understanding how obesity and physical inactivity lead to cardiovascular diseases. Vieira-Potter’s research for years has focused on how the inflammation of fat tissue impacts metabolism. The two discovered they could use each other’s expertise to better understand how fat tissue surrounding blood vessels impacts vascular function.

“We quickly realized we had very common research interests,” Padilla said. Before Padilla even became a full-time NEP faculty member in 2013, the two began writing research grant proposals to study the relationship between fat tissue and vascular function.

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