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Wellness Advocate



Battle of the Bulge

The Truth About Belly Fat

Surprise!

Everyone has some belly fat, even people who have flat abs. That's normal. But too much belly fat can affect your health in a way that other fat doesn't. Some of your fat is right under your skin. Other fat is deeper inside, around your heart, lungs, liver and other organs. It's that deeper fat—called "visceral" fat—that may be the bigger problem, even for thin people.

You need some visceral fat. It provides cushioning around some of your organs. But if you have too much of it, you may be more likely to get high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, dementia, and certain cancers, including breast cancer and colon cancer. The fat doesn't just sit there. It's an active part of your body, making 'lots of nasty substances,' says Kristen Hairston, MD, assistant professor of endocrinology and metabolism at Wake Forest School of Medicine.

"If you gain too much weight, your body starts to store your fat in unusual places. The normal areas where fat is stored may become so full that visceral fat is deposited into the organs and around the heart," says Carol Shively, PhD, professor of pathology and comparative medicine at Wake Forest School of Medicine.

The most precise way to determine how much visceral fat you have is to get a CT scan or an MRI. But there's a much simpler, low-cost way to check. Get a measuring tape, wrap it around your waist at your belly button and measure your waist. Do it while you're standing up, and make sure the tape measure is level. For your health's sake, you want your waist size to be less than 35 inches if you're a woman and less than 40 inches if you're a man.

Having a "pear shape"—bigger hips and thighs—is considered safer than an "apple shape," which describes a wider waistline. "What we're really pointing to with the apple versus pear," Hairston says, "is that, if you have more abdominal fat, it's probably an indicator that you have more visceral fat."

Thin People Have It, Too

Even if you're thin, you can still have too much visceral fat. How much you have is partly about your genes, and partly about your lifestyle, especially how active you are. Visceral fat likes inactivity. In one study, thin people who watched their diets but didn't exercise were more likely to have too much visceral fat. The key is to be active, no matter what size you are. See page two for more tips on beating the battle of the bulge.



Four Steps for Beating Belly Fat

1. Exercise: Vigorous exercise trims all your fat, including visceral fat.

Get at least 30 minutes of moderate exercise at least five days per week. Walking counts, as long as it's brisk enough that you work up a sweat and breathe harder, with your heart rate faster than usual.

More strenuous activity at least three times per week also helps. It slows down how much visceral fat you gain. But to really torch visceral fat, your workouts may need to be even more intense. If you are not currently active, it's a good idea to check with your healthcare provider before starting a fitness program.

2. Diet: When you lose weight, belly fat usually goes first.

Getting enough fiber is essential. Research shows that people who eat 10 grams of soluble fiber per day—without any other diet changes—build up less visceral fat over time than others. That's as simple as eating two small apples, a cup of green peas, or a half-cup of pinto beans.

3. Sleep: Getting the right amount of shut-eye helps.

In one study, people who got at least six to seven hours of sleep per night gained less visceral fat over five years compared to those who slept five or fewer hours per night. Sleep may not have been the only thing that mattered—but it was part of the picture.

4. Stress: Everyone has stress. How you handle it matters.

The best things you can do include relaxing with friends and family, meditating and/or praying, exercising to blow off steam and getting counseling, if needed. That leaves you healthier and better prepared to make good choices for yourself.

(Article courtesy of the WebMD



Recipe: Pasta Salad



Directions

1. In bowl, cover and chill pasta.
2. In large mixing bowl, combine vinegar, 2 tablespoons basil, sugar, salt, pepper, red pepper, 2 tablespoons oil and half of minced garlic.
3. Whisk to combine well. Add pasta, bell pepper and tomatoes and toss gently until well coated.
4. In food processor or blender, place bread and pulse a few times to produce coarse crumbs. In a medium skillet, heat remaining oil over medium-high heat. Stir in breadcrumbs and garlic. Sauté about 1½ - 2 minutes until browned and crisp. Remove from heat and let cool.
5. Top pasta with garlic crumbs and remaining basil. Serve (makes eight servings).

Ingredients

- 8 oz. whole-wheat fusilli, farfalle or other small pasta shape, cooked according to directions
- 1/4 cup balsamic vinegar (red or white)
- 4 Tbsp. finely chopped fresh basil, divided
- 1 tsp. turbinado sugar, optional
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
- 1/8 tsp. crushed red pepper (or to taste)
- 3 Tbsp. extra virgin olive oil, divided
- 4 cloves garlic, minced and divided
- 1 medium green bell pepper, finely chopped
- 4 plum or Roma tomatoes, coarsely chopped
- 1 slice whole-wheat bread (multigrain may be substituted)

NUTRITION INFORMATION (per serving) 180 calories | 5 g protein | 27 g carbohydrates | 4 g dietary fiber | 25 mg sodium | 6 g total fat

(Recipe courtesy of the American Institute for Cancer Research)