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The battle of the bulge

WOMEN'S WORLD

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Belly fat is bad news – it not only looks bad, its very detrimental to general health.

AS if worrying about your hips and thighs your entire adult life wasn't bad enough, you've recently noticed that your belly is getting bigger as well.

As a result, it's getting harder to button your jeans and an unsightly bulge appears above the top of your pants – sometimes unkindly referred to as the “muffin top”.

You always thought that the dreaded “beer belly” or “spare tyre” only developed in men, so why is this happening to you now?

While it is true that men are more prone to developing an apple-shaped body – where the abdomen grows larger – women will also start to develop it after menopause. Looks aside, this accumulation of belly fat is bad for your health. So it's time to fight the battle of the bulge with a strict diet and exercise routine.

It will be tempting to just rush out and buy bigger clothes, but it will not solve your problem.



The apple-shaped body, where the abdomen grows larger, is an indication of increased visceral fat, which is linked to a higher risk of heart disease, breast cancer, diabetes, metabolic syndrome, gallbladder problems, high blood pressure, and colorectal cancer.

Age, hormones, and genes

Belly fat increases as you get older, especially after menopause. This is because your body's metabolism will slow down with age, causing the amount of fat in your body to increase.

Unfortunately, women tend to gain more fat with age compared to men. Part of this may have to do with hormones. Menopause brings on hormonal changes that affect the way your body breaks down fat and where the fat is stored.

Menopause causes the distribution of body fat to change, so that is why you find less fat on your arms, legs, and hips, and more on your abdomen.

Don't blame it all on hormones though as genes may have something to do with it as well. Some women inherit a tendency to gain weight in their midsection because their mothers were like that, and their mother's mother before them.

Don't forget that as you get older, you are also physically slowing down. You become more sedentary and move a lot less. When you use less energy, your body stores it as fat.

It's the fat inside that counts

Even if your weight doesn't seem to be increasing, it doesn't mean you can rest easy. Abdominal fat can increase without overall weight gain because the fat in other areas of your body is decreasing.

The mirror alone isn't a good gauge of belly fat either. The really "bad" fat is not the "love handles" that you can grab with your hands – it's the fat that you can't see that you should be worried about. This is known as the visceral fat, which is deeper within the abdomen and surrounds the abdominal organs. This type of fat is linked to higher risk of heart disease, breast cancer, diabetes, metabolic syndrome, gallbladder problems, high blood pressure, and colorectal cancer.

Scientists have discovered why this type of fat is so dangerous – it is because the abdominal fat cells are not just lying dormant, waiting to be used as energy. These cells are active and produce substances that can affect your health.

For instance, it has been found that some of these fat cells produce hormones that promote insulin resistance, increasing the risk of diabetes; other fat cells produce the oestrogen hormone after menopause, increasing the risk of breast cancer.



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Measuring your midriff

As I mentioned earlier, you may gain abdominal fat without gaining weight. So measurements of your weight or even your body mass index (BMI) are not accurate ways of monitoring your belly fat.

The simplest method to gauge your internal fat deposits is actually to just measure your waist. Waist measurement must be done correctly with a measuring tape – you cannot just use your pants measurement to assume that it reflects your girth.

Place the measuring tape directly on your skin (if you are wearing clothes, make sure it is a light layer of clothing). The measurement should be taken halfway between your lowest rib and the top of your hip bone, at about the level of your belly button. Breathe normally and do not suck in your stomach. Make sure the tape is firm, but do not pull it so tight that it squeezes your skin.

A reading of more than 80cm (for women) and more than 94cm (for men) means that there is an unhealthy build-up of abdominal fat in the body, which increases the risk of chronic diseases.

Belly fat, off!

So, what can you do to get rid of this awful belly fat? Fortunately, this type of fat can be burned off with a regular exercise routine and a healthy diet.

Cardio workouts are some of the best ways to lose the tummy, as they help you to burn fat calories.

Strength training is also very important, but sometimes overlooked by people who want to lose weight. Strength training with weights is effective in helping you lose belly fat because it helps you to build muscles, which burns more calories.

One of the best exercises is swimming, which burns calories as well as builds and tones muscles. Walking or jogging (outdoors or on a treadmill) also works. Remember, strolling is not exercising – you have to work up a sweat by increasing your speed or incline.

In your daily workout, start with stretching and weight training first, and save the cardio workouts for the last, to avoid injuries.

Diet tips to burn belly fat

There is no secret diet that can help you magically make that belly bulge vanish. The same wisdom for healthy living applies here – a balanced diet, with a variety of foods, is the key to maintaining a healthy waistline.

Here are some tips to help you practise healthy eating and really see the results.

Watch what you eat, literally. There are lots of hidden calories in our meals, which we do not notice, especially when we are eating out. You may have ordered a salad, but the rich, creamy dressing piles on more calories than expected. Ask for a salad with dressing on the side, or with a balsamic vinegar dressing that has fewer calories.

Read nutrition labels on the food items that you buy. Compare the amount of calories, sugars and fats on different products. Choose products that use polyunsaturated fats, instead of saturated fats. Once you start becoming aware of these labels, you will be able to make wiser choices.

Do not skip meals. Eat at fixed times and do not snack between meals. If you find yourself getting too hungry between meals, eat smaller and more frequent meals. But make sure that the amounts of food during each meal are less, or else you will be packing it on!

Drinking tea and coffee may seem harmless, but not when each cup is accompanied by sugar and cream/milk. Cream and two cubes of sugar with your coffee or tea is almost equivalent to a slice of chocolate cake! If you need to have that hot drink, cut down on your sugar and cream.

Eat more complex carbohydrates (like wholegrains, beans, lentils, brown rice and root vegetables), as they are broken down into glucose more slowly than simple carbohydrates and thus provide a gradual steady stream of energy throughout the day.

Fad diets are tempting, especially if you're trying to lose a lot of weight rapidly. But these diets are called "fads" for a reason – they are only popular for a while because they don't work over the long-term!

Ultimately, it is willpower and discipline that will get you through a healthy diet and a strict exercise routine. At the other end, a slimmer you awaits!

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