

Reduce your Waist size

by James Bone

Worried about your weight?

Maybe you shouldn't be – it's your waist you should be more concerned with.

(And even THIN people can carry too much fat around their middle!)

Finding the jeans too tight round the waist? Needing to let the buckle out, find that doing the jacket up is a little tight? – then this article could be for you!

Wanting to stay healthy for life and prevent future problems, then read on.....

So what is the problem with carrying too much fat around your middle?

Unfortunately a lot – it greatly increases your risk of getting heart disease (blood vessel inflammation & damage) and diabetes (reducing sensitivity to insulin) – 2 of our worse chronic diseases in our society.

Depression has also been linked with abdominal thickening.

What is abdominal fat?

Putting it simply, there are 2 main types of fat storage in your body – visceral, where fat is stored around your organs, and subcutaneous, where fat is stored under your skin – this is the fat you can easily see, while visceral fat can be hidden, and only perceived via a thickening waist. Visceral fat is the fat most linked with health problems.

Healthy vs unhealthy fat body types can often be represented by a simple model – those with too much visceral/abdominal fat have a shape more like an APPLE, while those with more superficial fat, tend to have a PEAR type shape ie larger hips to waist measure. Some women get concerned about the fat around their hips, but from a health perspective this is not a problem like abdominal fat.

So what causes this problem?

Unfortunately the cause is quite complex, which is also why there is no simple solution. There are some causes you can't change and there are some you can.

Factors you can't change:

- Your genes can dictate where you store excess fat, and some of us are born with very efficient bodies, making it easy to store fat, especially around the mid line
- Our gender can also affect fat storage – men tend to store more fat around the midline, as women are protected somewhat by the estrogen hormone. However, this protection reduces after menopause, and some women can find their waist begin to thicken.

Factors that you can change are mostly linked to your lifestyle choices:

Diet – Taking in more energy than you need such as eating too much, eating the wrong foods, or perhaps eating in the wrong way. Foods high in saturated/trans fatty acids, may more easily get laid down around the abdominal

area.

Physical Activity – being too sedentary and not using enough energy can lead to problems. Also after the age of 40 we start to lose muscle mass.

It is believed a large part of this is due to inactivity. Muscle provides an important function for health – it increases metabolism, increases insulin sensitivity, protects joints from stress, helps you to move well, and may help to keep your waist thinner (see strength training below).

Not enough sleep – there is growing evidence to link reduced sleep with being overweight, even in children. It would be interesting to see if this also translates to a thickened waist. *Are you getting enough sleep?*

Stress – this is the really interesting one. Most of us generally know that lack of exercise and poor diet affect the waist line, but the effects of stress are less known.

There are a number of studies which have shown that people with higher stress, have thicker waist lines, even in thin women. The culprit is believed to be CORTISOL – the chronic stress hormone. People exposed to a lot of stress can produce chronic levels of cortisol. Cortisol in acute situations is helpful, but chronic levels of cortisol can be very damaging to the body and brain. Cortisol also seems to specifically help fat to be stored around the visceral organs, and so expand our waist lines. Some people use eating (especially rich foods) to soothe their stress – so if their cortisol is high then the excess fat is going to go straight to the waist line. If you are a stress eater it might be helpful to find some other stress management strategies.

Alcohol – fatty foods (ie chips) eaten with alcohol often gets stored directly to the waist. So perhaps watch how you eat and drink.

Other Factors specific to you may also be present such as medications - see your doctor about this

Measuring your Waist

The best way to measure if you have too much abdominal fat is via a cross body CT scan. However this is expensive and exposes you to radiation.

A simpler and reasonably reliable test is to measure your waist.

Try this:

Bare your skin and find your navel.

Take a tape measure and measure at the level of the navel (or 1 cm below) – make sure the tape is even around the waist.

Measure twice (to check) and do it at the end of an easy exhale.

	Men	Women
Healthy	< 94 cm	< 80cm
Increase Health risk	94 – 102 cm	80 – 88 cm
High Health risk	> 102 cm	> 88 cm

(Australian Heart Foundation)

So what can you do to help reduce your waist (and improve your health)?

- **Implement a healthy lifestyle change...**

Changing our behaviour is not easy. So don't over do it – try changing ONE small thing at a time. Get used to it, then try something else.

Get lots of SUPPORT – friends, family, doctors, support groups, there is even a specific web based support group just for men now.

No need to feel guilty if you stuff up a few times – we are only human.

Perseverance is the key – just keep trying – it happens eventually. Stay motivated and look toward the long term, not instantaneous quick fixes, quick diets or weight losses.

- **Increase and maintain your physical activity**

Aim for at least 30 – 60 minutes of moderate physical activity on most days of the week, such as brisk walking, dancing, cycling, swimming. *(Some research suggests more vigorous aerobic exercise is helpful for waist loss, but you need to check with your doctor/health practitioner before doing vigorous activity to check there are no risks involved for you).*

- **Try strength training, especially as you become older**

Strength Training can help preserve your muscles, metabolism, bone density, and reduce some other health risks. Strength training in older people has also been shown to reduce waist size, even when weight remained unchanged. Aim to do at least 2 to 3 sessions per week of moderate weight training of about 8 to 10 exercises using major body groups, for about 8 to 15 reps. See your physiotherapist, gym or personal trainer for specific exercises suitable for yourself. Remember strength training can be done with weights, or machines, but you can also use your body weight and low cost resistance bands. You don't need to go to the gym to do strength training. Some people start with just a bag of rice.

- **Get enough sleep and rest**

Aim for at least 7 to 9 hours sleep according to your physical activity levels.

- **Manage your stress and reduce your cortisol levels** – see “yoga for life” below

Balance to your lifestyle is often the key to managing stress. Chronic stress and high cortisol is usually associated with chronic stress load – look to change your stress load. Yoga says that much of our stress begins with our thinking. Daily meditation and breathing are simple strategies that many people find helpful to manage stress and become more aware of damaging thinking patterns.

Remember don't allow your lifestyle change to become a stress

- **Diet Tips**

There is no magic diet – research has shown that diets low in fat, high in protein etc, so long as energy intake is reduced – all help to reduce weight and waist line. Most diets peak at about 6 months.

However the CSIRO have found that diets higher in protein may be helpful for men to lose their waist measure.

Diets higher in protein may also help preserve muscle – though strength exercise

is the key to this.

So try....

- Eating healthy – only take in as much energy as you need - so eat less but good quality. Food should be fresh, less processed, smell and taste good
- Consider regional diets – eg the Mediterranean diet has been associated with good health
- Watch your eating when stressed
- Avoid missing meals and extreme diets – this can lead to decreased metabolism
- Eat breakfast
- Be mindful of how you eat, not just what you eat – eating on the run can be stressful. Eat in a relaxed, nice environment with good company.

• Practice Yoga for Life

Research has shown that practising yoga regularly – at least 30 minutes once per week for 4 years, can contribute significantly to healthy weight management – helping people with normal weight not to gain weight and helping people who are over weight to lose weight.

No research has been done regarding yoga and waist measure, however, yoga practice, even as low as one session, has been shown to reduce cortisol levels in people with high levels of cortisol. This itself may reduce fat being deposited around the abdomen.

Yoga is also associated with healthy lifestyle practices and training to expand one's inner AWARENESS which may help with making healthier choices.

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