

Well Ahead Blog

Ask the doc how belly fat impacts your heart health

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Q: I read something about visceral fat and the production of toxins that affect the heart and other systems in the body. What's the belly fat-heart connection, and how do I measure visceral fat?



Leslie Poor, MD

Let's start with an explanation of what visceral fat is. Unlike subcutaneous fat, which is the fat you can feel when you pinch an inch of skin around your waist, for example, visceral fat is deep within the abdominal area, surrounding your internal organs, such as the heart, liver and lungs. We all need a healthy amount of visceral fat to protect the organs, but our expanding waistlines are clear indicators that we have more than enough protection in this area. Women in particular see a visceral fat increase after [menopause](#) when there is a decrease in estrogen and growth hormones.

The problem with visceral fat is that it's not just sitting there, making us feel uncomfortable and unsightly in our clothing. Researchers have found that visceral fat, in particular, becomes biologically active, secreting hormones and cytokines (immune system chemicals), which send signals to the brain, liver, muscles and vascular (blood vessel) system that can disrupt metabolism, hormone production, blood pressure and blood clotting.

Visceral fat is associated with increased risk for health problems such as metabolic disorders and cardiovascular disease. It can lead to insulin resistance and [type 2 diabetes](#). Abdominal fat is linked to higher levels of LDL ("bad cholesterol") and lower levels of HDL ("good cholesterol"), which leads to increased risk for [coronary disease](#) and [stroke](#). In essence, your belly fat sets off a chain of responses that affects normal functioning of the body. Keep in mind that this whole process can be triggered by salt, sugar, and processed food intake.

Beyond BMI: Body shape and belly fat tell the heart risk story best

The limitation with body mass index (BMI) is that it only takes into account your height and weight. More critical than BMI, in fact, is the ratio of body fat to lean muscle, and the distribution of visceral fat in your body. Studies have been conducted using MRI and CT scans to show exactly how and where visceral fat encroaches on the body's organs, but this is not a standard test for most people.

A simple method to assess visceral fat is to look at your body shape. People with apple-shaped bodies who carry their weight in the middle have increased visceral fat compared to people with pear-shaped bodies who carry their weight in the hips. A more quantitative measurement is waist circumference. Women with a waist measurement of greater than 35 inches and men with greater than 40 are considered abdominally obese and have increased cardiometabolic risk.

The good news is you can impact visceral fat with standard weight loss methods, including a healthy cardiovascular diet and daily exercise. (The American Heart Association recommends 150 minutes of moderate intensity exercise per week.) As always, a long-term approach to a healthy heart and weight includes consulting with your doctor and adopting new lifestyle behaviors.

Learn how to protect your heart during each stage of life. Hear Dr. Leslie Poor speak on [women's heart health for a lifetime](#), on Wednesday, February 15, 2017, at Main Line Health Center in Newtown Square.

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