

Waist Management: Gauging Your Risk



A \$2.99 fabric tape measure may do a better job than a \$65.00 bathroom scale when it comes to determining whether your body-fat level puts you at higher risk for heart disease, diabetes, or breast cancer. Research shows that waist size correlates better with those ailments than body-mass index, a measure of obesity that takes into account both height and weight.

The size of your waist is a surprisingly accurate indicator of your abdominal fat. That's important because many studies have shown that fat stored in the upper body, especially the abdomen, is a strong signal of increased risk of disease. By contrast, people who carry their excess baggage on their hips, bottoms, and thighs are at significantly lower risk.

Lower-body fat accumulates just under the skin, but "abdominal fat is actually inside your abdominal cavity," says Marc-Andre Cornier, M.D., assistant professor of medicine at the University

of Colorado. "Exactly why it is related to a worsening risk, we're not sure, but we know that it is more metabolically active than fat stored below the waist."

The risk of health problems increases at a waist measurement of 35 inches for women and 40 inches for men, according to The National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. But a recent study by the New York Obesity Research Center at Columbia University found that the risk of heart disease and diabetes starts inching up at just under 33 inches for women and 35 inches for men. Those numbers hold true regardless of height.

You can't get rid of abdominal fat through spot exercises; overall weight loss is required. The good news is that as you lose weight, the metabolically active abdominal fat comes off faster than fat from other parts of your body.

Measure Your Waist

Where your waistband sits may not be the most accurate spot for measuring abdominal girth. Here's one way to do it:

Along the side of your body, locate your lowest rib and the top of your hipbone. Put the tape measure halfway between those two points, which are about 2 to 3 inches apart. If you can't feel your hipbone, place the tape an inch below your bottom rib. Stand up straight, but don't suck in your stomach. Take a deep breath, exhale, and take the measurement at the end of the exhalation.
