



never mind those **LOVE** handles

Beware the belly fat you can't see

:: by Lia Tremblay

Most people have struggled with their weight at some point, whether a momentary crisis after the holidays or a lifelong fight with the scale. It's frustrating when things don't fit, and we all know about the health effects of extra weight – it can worsen everything from how well you sleep to how your hips and knees are holding up.

But fat alone is not the enemy when it comes to serious health risks. A particular kind of fat, in a particular part of the body, carries overwhelming health risks. And you might have it even if your outward appearance is pretty fit.

What is Visceral Fat?

Visceral fat, which builds up around your abdominal organs, is different from the subcutaneous fat that accumulates on our thighs, rear ends and upper arms. It doesn't just sit there, ruining your beach photos and your wardrobe. It releases substances into the body that are linked to potentially devastating health issues.

For example, it releases a substance called retinol-binding protein 4 (RBP 4) that is known to increase the risk of coronary heart disease. This is likely due to RBP 4's harmful effects of insulin resistance, a precursor to metabolic syndrome and Type 2 diabetes, which are known cardiac risk factors.

Aside from diabetes and heart risk, visceral fat is also linked to cancer. Studies have shown colorectal and breast cancers to be much higher in people with expanded waistlines. In one study, biomarkers for breast cancer were significantly reduced when patients lost an average of just 12 pounds.

It's even a risk factor for dementia. A study of more than 6,000 people, spanning an average of 36 years, found that those with the most abdominal fat in midlife were significantly more likely to develop dementia than those with the least abdominal fat.

This visceral fat is essentially an organ unto itself – the only one in the body that is purely harmful. And because it gathers internally, around the organs instead of just under the skin, it may not be as apparent as the fat we're fretting about in the dressing-room mirror. Even people who do not appear overweight may be harboring this quiet enemy, and without surgery or high-tech imaging it's impossible to see.

Time to Measure Up

So how do you know if visceral fat could be a problem for you? Break out the measuring tape. Stand up straight and exhale, then measure around your middle – the widest part of your waist, across your belly button. Write down the number of inches you measured.

Generally speaking, if your waist measures 35 inches or more (for a woman) or 40 inches or more (for a man) you are likely harboring too much visceral fat.

This is the standard generally used in studies of visceral fat. Some doctors may offer more precise measurements with body fat analyzers, which measure it on a scale of 1 to 59. Anything above a 13 on this scale is considered risky.

What to Do About It

There's no easy or exciting way around this: It takes long-term changes to your lifestyle. Regular exercise and a smart diet are the only things that are proven to reduce visceral fat. Here are some basic rules of thumb:

Limit sugar. Not just that spoonful in your daily coffee, but in all the places you might not know it's hiding. Check your yogurt, pasta sauce, even ketchup for sugar or high-fructose corn syrup. And of course, sugary drinks like soda and sweet tea should be consumed in thoughtful moderation.

Watch your alcohol. Alcohol limits your body's fat-burning potential, gives you calories devoid of nutrition, and may lower your inhibitions enough to derail your smart eating choices.

Choose your carbs carefully. Processed carbohydrates like white bread and rice will have much the same effect as sugar on your metabolism. Stick to whole grains and vegetables for your carb intake.

Get plenty of sleep. Sleep deprivation disrupts the body's production of the hormones that regulate hunger and fullness. If you aren't getting enough shut-eye at night, you are far more likely to overindulge at the table.

Move more. Even when you're making smarter food choices, you need exercise to burn off the excess. Exercise is also directly related to heart health, mental clarity and even good sleep. Find an activity you enjoy doing regularly so it's a pleasure to do without prodding.

Stay on Track

Whether you're in a good range right now, or you've found that you have some work to do, be sure to keep up with regular doctor visits. Your doctor can help you keep track of your progress and offer new ways to reach your goals, including referrals to specialists in nutrition, exercise and weight loss.

Visceral fat is a dangerous thing, but it doesn't have to derail your health. Maintaining an active, healthy lifestyle keeps you in control and keeps that silent enemy at a safe distance.