

Belly Fat is A Serious Health Risk Factor for Children, Teens & Adults

By Barry Bertolet, M.D.

Previously, most obesity experts considered total body fat as the main predictor of weight-related diseases; that is the higher the body fat percentage, the higher the health risk. Now, it is thought that location of fatty tissue is equally, if not more, important than total body fat.

Fat stored around the abdomen and waist (also called central obesity) is believed to be a better predictor of weight-related diseases like adult-onset diabetes, abnormal cholesterol levels, high blood pressure, gallstones, stroke, peripheral vascular diseases and heart attack. Excess abdominal fat is also associated with increased risk of breast cancer, problems with ovulation and obstructive sleep apnea.

The number of overweight children and adolescents is one of the most important current public health concerns. According to NHANES 2003–2004, obesity and the risk for obesity are rising in children and teens. The survey shows that 19 percent of school-aged children and about 17 percent of teens are overweight; and another 20 percent are at risk for becoming overweight.

There are also some differences in obesity according to racial/ethnic groups. In males, obesity is highest for Mexican Americans, then Caucasians, and finally African-Americans. In females, obesity is highest for African-Americans, then Mexican Americans, and finally Caucasians. Overall, Mississippi has the second highest level of adult obesity in the nation at 28.1 percent, and the highest overweight high school student level at 15.7 percent. The state spent an estimated \$263 per person in 2003 on medical-costs related to obesity, which was the 23rd highest amount in the nation.

What is your body shape? People who are “apple-shaped” tend to store excess body fat around their stomach and abdomen, while those with a “pear shape” tend to gain weight on their buttocks and thighs. Thus, apple-shaped individuals have a greater risk of weight-related disorders and need to pay more attention to normalizing their weight. Where we store fat is largely the result of gender (men tend to be apple-shaped, women pear-shaped), or age (after menopause women become more apple-shaped). However, overconsumption of alcohol appears to increase fat accumulation around the stomach in both men and women.

Waist circumference is a rough guide to determining whether you are a higher-risk apple-shape, or a lower-risk pear-shape. Measure your waist just above your belly button. If you are male, a healthy waist measurement is less than 40 inches; and for women, less than 35 inches. A larger waist leads to an increased risk for diabetes, high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease.

Test yourself. Measure your waist and hips. Divide the waist measurement by the hip measurement. A woman's waist to hip ratio should not exceed 0.80. For men, the number should not exceed 1.00.

What can you do? Since the major risk of obesity is indirect (e.g., obesity causes or worsens hypertension, cholesterol abnormalities and diabetes), the greatest urgency is to detect and treat these problems aggressively. Beyond this, lifestyle modification therapies remain first-line interventions. These lifestyle interventions include weight loss to achieve an ideal weight and healthy eating habits. You should also increase physical activity (goal of at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity activity daily) with a focus on aerobic training such as stairclimbing, walking on an incline, running and leg squats, leg presses and deadlifts.

Barry Bertolet, M.D., is a board-certified cardiologist with Cardiology Associates of North Mississippi, P.A., and serves on the North Mississippi Medical Center Heart Institute medical staff.