

7 Secrets to Losing Belly Fat

As we age, we tend to gain weight, especially in our abdomens. In addition to making it more difficult to fit into last year's swimsuit, belly fat can have a significant impact on our health.

That's because the fat doesn't just sit there, spoiling your silhouette. Belly fat and its companion, visceral fat—the fat that hides deep in your body—continuously create inflammatory compounds that wreak havoc in your body, increasing the risk of heart disease, diabetes, cancer and many other conditions.

Don't despair, though, because there are seven surefire ways to melt belly fat away.

1. Exercise before breakfast. A British study found that exercising before breakfast burns more body fat than exercising later in the day. As an added bonus, greater amounts of artery-clogging fats in the blood that cause heart attacks are reduced in early morning workouts. Participants underwent three trials one to two weeks apart, involving walking briskly for an hour before eating breakfast, taking the same walk after eating breakfast, or not exercising at all. Although exercising increased the amount of fat their bodies burned when compared to not exercising, exercising before breakfast caused a greater loss of fat—up to 33 percent more than exercising after breakfast.

2. Eat good fats. A diet rich in monounsaturated fats (MUFAs), such as olive oil, avocados, nuts and seeds, can help melt away belly fat. Most experts agree that olive oil is one of the best for cooking and salads because of its high MUFA content, which lowers LDL ("bad") cholesterol. In addition, olive oil contains compounds that signal to your brain that your stomach's full, causing you to eat less and feel satiated longer.

3. Jog instead of lifting weights. Researchers at Duke University found that aerobic exercise is a much more efficient way to lose belly fat than resistance training or a combination of the two. A study of overweight adults ages 18 to 70 determined that aerobic training burned 67 percent more calories when compared to resistance training.

4. Eliminate trans fats. Although large amounts of trans fats have been eliminated from many foods, it's still hanging around in some vegetable shortenings, cookies and snack foods. (Beware of the ingredient "partially hydrogenated oil.") Research at Wake Forest University found that monkeys who were fed a Western-style diet that included trans fats gained 7.2 percent more body weight than those who were fed a diet of monounsaturated fats, such as olive oil. The number of calories and amount of fat in both diets was identical. Most of the weight gain was in the abdominal area.

5. Reduce stress. When you're stressed, your body releases a powerful hormonal mixture of adrenaline, cortisol and insulin, which not only increases your appetite and causes your body to produce more fat, but also usually sends the extra fat straight to your waistline. For an immediate reduction in stress, close your eyes and take long, slow, deep breaths for about five minutes. Your stress level will fall—and so should those belly-bursting hormones.

6. Get enough sleep. Not getting enough sleep can throw off your body's natural rhythm and cause you to produce a great quantity of fat-inducing hormones, similar to hormones created when you're stressed. One study found that people who got sufficient sleep gained less belly fat over a five-year period when compared to those who were sleep-deprived.

7. Eat fiber. Researchers at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center found that simply eating more soluble fiber from vegetables and fruits reduces visceral fat. They found that every 10-gram increase in soluble fiber eaten each day

decreased the amount of belly fat by 3.7 percent over five years. Adding moderate activity decreased belly fat even further to 7.4 percent. Foods high in soluble fiber include apples, oats, peas and beans. Two small apples contain 10 grams of soluble fiber.

A study from Penn State found that people who ate a healthy diet that included all-whole grains lost more belly fat than people who ate the same diet but ate refined grains instead. In addition, their levels of C-reactive protein (CRP) were lowered by 38 percent, while levels remained the same in the group who ate refined grains. High levels of CRP are linked to heart disease.

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