

Brown Fat: An Obesity-Busting Miracle?

Five years ago, you'd have had a hard time finding many health reports on something called "brown fat." Today it's hard to avoid headlines hailing it as an obesity-busting miracle.

The New York Times, *WebMD*, and *Popular Mechanics* have all carried articles extolling its virtues. Books—like Dr. James Lyons' best-selling *Brown Fat Revolution*—have flooded the market.

But what exactly is brown fat, why is it getting so much attention, and what can you do to put it to work for you?

"The reason we are hearing about brown fat now is because until recently it was believed that brown fat was found in rodents and human infants, who use the brown fat as a method of staying warm," Vandana Sheth, a registered dietitian and spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, tells Newsmax Health.

"However, three [research] groups recently found that brown fat is found in adults, and we now believe there might be a link between higher brown fat and helping people stay lean."

Good Fat, Bad Fat

Brown fat—also called brown adipose tissue (BAT)—is one of two primary types of fat in the body, the other being the familiar "white" or "yellow" fat you pile on when you gain weight.

We're all born with brown fat—concentrated around the back, neck and shoulders—and it is believed to help maintain our core temperature by burning calories and fat reserves to generate body heat. Until recently, scientists thought BAT disappeared in childhood. But five years ago, researchers

found that brown fat is also present in adults and that it is turned on by cold temperatures, exercise and some foods. Because of its fat-burning properties, BAT has become the focus of intense scientific research.

Studies have found that when BAT is switched on, it can produce 300 times more heat than any other organ in the body. Women and lean younger people have more brown fat than men or heavier older individuals.

Turning On Brown Fat

Researchers are now investigating a wide range of techniques to activate brown fat. British scientists at the University of Nottingham have found individuals who immerse parts of their bodies in ice water can switch on the brown fat in their bodies.

Columbia University scientists have determined it is possible to convert yellow-white fat to brown with a class of drugs called thiazolidinediones, now used to lower blood sugar in Type 2 diabetes. Other researchers are now assessing whether lowering body temperatures turns on brown fat and leads to weight loss.

Michael Symonds, who is heading up the brown-fat studies at Nottingham, predicts the new research will revolutionize obesity treatment and lead to new techniques based on managing BAT with nutrition, exercise, environmental and therapeutic techniques. He envisions a day when certain foods that switch on BAT are labeled with a “thermogenic index” to alert consumers to their fat-burning benefits.

Experts suggest the following strategies to activate brown fat:

- Lower the temperature in your home, office and car.
- Exercise in a cold room or outdoors in the winter.

- Consume cold drinks, particularly while exercising (avoid hot drinks).
- Eat chili peppers, which contain capsaicin, which prompts brown fat to burn more calories.
- Eat more yogurt, milk and cheese. Dairy products have been shown to activate brown fat.

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