

## Health

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### Waist size is linked to the potential for heart trouble

By Rebecca Cohen – Columnist

Studies conducted around the world have found that only a minority of people know that a bigger waist size raises the odds of having a heart attack and lowers a breast cancer patient's chances of survival. All the studies have concluded that measuring waist circumference is an easy, low-cost indicator that should be added to measurements of other cardiovascular risk factors such as blood pressure, lipid levels and blood glucose. Putting this information into practice, Canada has become the first country in the world to develop comprehensive guidelines to address the management and prevention of obesity. These guidelines urge health care professionals to address the growing obesity issue by measuring the waist circumference of every adult and every child older than 10.

Overweight or obesity is traditionally determined by using body-mass index, or BMI, a ratio of height to weight. A BMI of more than 25 is overweight. Above 30 is considered obese. But information worldwide is suggesting that waist circumference, waist-hip ratio and neck circumference are better measures of risk than weight, BMI and skin fold thickness. Several studies have even made a point of identifying the fact that where a person's excess body fat is located is more important than how overweight or obese the person is. People who carry their weight primarily as "visceral abdominal fat" (a deep layer of fat that wraps around the internal organs) have a higher risk for high cholesterol, type 2 diabetes and elevated blood pressure, as well as an increased risk of sudden death. Waist sizes of 35 inches for women and 40 inches for men in North America seem to be the dangerous cut-off points that put people in the high-risk category for heart disease. The figures are slightly higher or lower for people in other parts of the world due to physique and lifestyle differences.

What does this mean to each of us? The first step is to realize that as weight creeps up, so does your blood pressure. Love handles will nudge blood pressure higher even if you're young (under 44), have a healthful overall weight and have a blood pressure that is relatively low. Excess weight sets you up for many health problems, and now it is evident that waist size is a key factor in predicting health risks. For women, keep your waist size under 33 inches (the danger zone is 35 or more); for men the optimal waist size is 35 inches or less (the danger zone is 40 inches or more). And remember, even if you have a normal weight and BMI, you can be at high risk if you carry most of your fat around your middle.

How can you get rid of abdominal fat? If you already have a fat belly, you need to follow a calorie-reduced, healthful nutrition plan and increase your physical activity (at least 30 minutes of moderate exercise three to five times a week). This will force your body to burn its stored fat as fuel. But don't forget that you cannot control which pockets of fat are burned first. So even though you have a large amount of abdominal fat and only a small amount of fat around your face, your body may decide to reduce your facial fat first. Or it may burn off some of the fat from the stomach area, then some from your face, or thighs or arms, etc. So, reducing fat from your middle can be a slow process and you must be patient, especially if you have a natural apple shape. You need to reduce your stress level because the stress hormone cortisol stimulates the storage of fat around the middle. And, if you are a post-menopausal woman, you may find that extra weight is stored around your middle. You can help to stop the weight gain with exercise, reduced calorie intake and healthful eating, but without sufficient estrogen, more fat will be stored around the middle than other places. By changing a few lifestyle habits, you can reduce your health risks significantly. So, invest in a tape measure and use it to help stay healthy.