

# The shocking truth about your spare tyre

NEW RESEARCH WARNS THAT BIG BELLIES ARE A HEALTH TIMEBOMB BUT LOSING JUST 4CM OFF YOUR WAIST COULD HELP YOU LIVE LONGER. **BY CAROLINE JONES**

**A**fter a long, long winter many of us have an extra roll of flab or two lurking under our jumpers, ones that we're desperate to shift.

The trouble is, changes to metabolism as we get older make our bodies much more likely to pile on weight in this area – the dreaded middle-aged spread.

But a belly is not just an unsightly nuisance. Research has shown that a big tummy could also be a killer, even on otherwise slim people.

It's widely known that men develop what is often dubbed a beer belly as they get older, and stop burning off calories as efficiently. But women are equally vulnerable. A study released last week by Concordia University, US, found middle-aged women are more likely to develop a spare tyre, thanks to hormonal changes, which cause fat to be distributed in a different way.

Lead researcher Dr Sylvia Santosa explains why these results are especially worrying, saying: "Fat stored around the abdomen is more dangerous and dramatically increases the risk of serious health problems."

Until recently, scientists thought that all fat was created equal, but experts now believe that the sort that forms around the middle is different to that found elsewhere in the body.

Abdominal fat is unstable, it wraps itself around your internal organs and releases toxic chemicals.

"This puts you at high risk of health conditions such as diabetes, heart disease and stroke," explains Jean Pierre Despres, Scientific Director of the ICCR, an organisation dedicated to tackling the rise in abdominal fat.

**What is abdominal fat and why is it deadly?**

Abdominal or visceral fat is the tissue that forms around the heart, liver, kidneys and pancreas, causing a bulge in the tummy. "It may seem an inert

lump of lard, but it's highly active and constantly pumping poisons into the bloodstream, which can trigger changes in metabolism," explains David Haslam of The National Obesity Forum.

The latest research shows that the chemicals released by tummy fat can raise your cholesterol, blood pressure and blood sugar – seriously increasing your risk of heart attack, diabetes, Alzheimer's, breast and bowel cancer.

However, studies have also shown that this deadly visceral fat is the first to disappear as soon as you go on a diet or start exercising a bit more.

This is because belly fat is just stored energy in the form of fat – accumulated by eating more calories than our bodies need. This means, just by eating less and exercising more, you can ensure this fat starts to break down and is excreted before it can do any lasting harm.

**Tummy fat constantly pumps poison into the blood**

**How do you measure up?**

Figures show that only 50% of British people have any idea what their waist measures, despite evidence showing that it's actually more important to health than knowing your overall body weight. In fact you can still be abdominally obese, with all the health risks that are attached, even if you have a normal BMI or "healthy" weight.

To measure your waist, find the halfway point between the bottom of your ribs and your hipbone. This is where you should wrap the tape measure around you to give an accurate waist measurement. Visit [myhealthywaist.org](http://myhealthywaist.org) for more advice.

**How big is too big?**

Your waistline is classed as unhealthy if it is more than 94cm (37") for men and 80cm (31") for women. If your waist falls into the "too big" camp, it's time to trim.

But if all this sounds worrying, the good news is that researchers have also proved that losing just 4cm (1.6") from your waistline will slash your risk of early death by 60%.

Which is an even better incentive to diet than simply slipping back into your favourite jeans.



**I ditched my belly AND my blood pressure pills**



Alison Roberts, 52, is a pharmacy technician from Ringshall, Suffolk. She went from a 44in waist to 31in (111cm to 79cm) by making a few simple diet changes and being more active

I knew I ought to lose weight when I reached a dress size 24 and 17st. I couldn't wear trousers any more as my belly bulged though them and I could only wear clothes with elasticated waists. I blamed it on the fact I'd had caesareans when I had my two boys so I had no tummy muscles left, but that was just an excuse.

I work in a hospital and walking through the cardiac ward used to frighten me as I knew my weight put me at high risk of a heart attack. I also had high blood pressure but it was hard to know where to start. Then I heard about my local Rosemary Conley Diet and Fitness Club ([www.rosemaryconley.com](http://www.rosemaryconley.com)) on the radio and liked the idea of losing weight with others who would give encouragement and support along the way.

I started walking everywhere, even up the three flights of stairs at work, and doing two fitness classes a week. I overhauled my diet, reducing portion sizes and cutting unhealthy food out – simple things like cooking with less cream and more tomatoes. And instead of my nightly wine, I only had two glasses a week.

Slowly but surely it worked and within a year my waist had dropped by 13 inches and I weighed just 10st 5lb. Now I can buy dresses in a size 12 and wear trousers again. It's great to know I've also reduced my risk of heart disease. I've even been able to come off the blood pressure drugs.



## TRY THESE SIX SIMPLE TRICKS FOR PINCHING INCHES FROM YOUR WAISTLINE

### Drink more water

**WHY?** This simple switch could be enough to shift inches from your belly. Scientists found sugar-based drinks, like those in fizzy drinks, are much more likely to cause tummy fat than calories from other sources. Last month, a study found that drinking just one fizzy drink a day could increase your risk of developing diabetes.



Switching to diet drinks might not help either as some studies suggest they could actually increase weight gain! But water is calorie-free, helps you feel full and will ward off the bloated look dehydration causes.

### Get off the sofa

**WHY?** Being sedentary – sitting or lying down for too many hours a day – is now thought to be the single most important trigger of abdominal obesity. But you don't have to join a gym to turn it around. "Just being physically active for at least 30 minutes per day – whether it's walking, housework or even playing with the kids – is the most effective way to shave inches off your waistline," says fitness trainer Nicola Ayres.

Exercise will slash stress. Research shows this can help prevent fat being stored around the middle, see right.

### Get nutty

**WHY?** A recent Spanish study found that people who added a handful of mixed nuts to their daily diet lost more weight around their belly and had healthier blood-sugar levels, reducing their risk of heart disease and diabetes. Nuts are high in essential fatty acids, calcium and magnesium, which also has the benefit of helping to banish water retention. Plus they are packed with protein, which keeps you feeling fuller for longer, making you less likely to snack.



### Don't ditch dairy

**WHY?** Although many diets advocate cutting down on milk, several studies show those who still drink the white stuff lose more weight than those who ban it – and mainly from their waist. Researchers think this may be because dairy foods contain a component that helps to break down body fat in this area. Research by Cardiff University even suggested full-fat milk could boost metabolism and help you burn more calories, while lowering your risk of heart disease. Putting semi-skimmed milk in your tea and on cereal is a good compromise.

### Be clever with carbs

**WHY?** Cakes, white bread, rice and pasta are all high glycemic index (GI) carbohydrates packed with sugar. "Eating too many can overstimulate the body's insulin response, making you store fat, especially around the belly," explains nutritionist Yinka Thomas. Switch to low GI wholegrain carbs instead, such as wholemeal bread, pasta and flour. You could also try one of the latest low-carb or low-sugar products such as Slim Pasta (£2.49 from Holland & Barrett or [slimpasta.co.uk](http://slimpasta.co.uk)).



### Slash stress

**WHY?** "Stomach fat has been linked to high stress levels," says nutritionist Linda Foster. "When we're feeling frazzled, cortisol is released from our adrenal glands and this causes the body to lay down fat around the stomach." A study by Yale University, US, found that even slim women are more likely to have excess belly fat if they regularly feel stressed. So as well as overhauling your diet and exercise habits, it makes sense to slash your stress levels, whether by trying yoga, making time every evening for a 20-minute "me-time" bath or simply listening to your favourite chill-out music for a few minutes each day.