The 40 Inch Waist

Carrying extra weight -- especially around the middle -- is more than a vanity issue. It’s a health issue, too. Men are more likely than women to have belly fat, and having lots of it increases your risk of heart disease, some types of cancer, type 2 diabetes, lung disease, and even dementia.

Although there are more precise and involved ways to judge, your waist size is currently the easiest way to tell if you have too much belly fat. For men, risks increase if your waist size is over 40 inches; for women, over 35 inches.

(To measure your waist, place a tape measure around your bare abdomen just above your hipbone. Pull the tape measure tightly, but don’t push it into your skin. Make sure the the tape measure is untwisted and level all the way around you. No sucking in your belly! Just exhale and measure.)

Fat wrapped around your inner organs (visceral fat) is much more metabolically active than fat right under your skin (subcutaneous fat). Researchers suspect that belly fat cells are the worst because of their proximity to major organs. They ooze noxious chemicals which boosts destructive reactions like increased inflammation and hardening of the arteries.

One bit of good news is that fat around the middle isn’t as stubborn as fat under the skin. While spot exercises like sit-ups won’t specifically remove your spare tire, exercise is a must. Healthy eating and increased physical activity are the best ways to lower your total body fat. Reducing the stress in your life and keeping a food journal can help you reclaim your washboard tummy, too.

Prayer: Loving God, help me care for myself as you care for me. Let me remember that the routine choices I make can impact my life in big ways. Amen.

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Your Advocate

Greg Kirschner, MD

Dr. Gregory Kirschner is a family physician who teaches in the residency program at Advocate Lutheran General Hospital.

Dr. Greg Kirschner has been a family physician for over twenty years. While there are few doctors who will say, “I’m an expert in men’s health,” Kirschner acknowledges that today he does see many middle-aged and older men.

“Doctors’ offices are generally over-represented by women who make up 60 to 70% of outpatients,” says Kirschner. “Men are reluctant to come in. They disappear until their first child. That’s when they get a sense of responsibility for their health.”

Men know about acute and chronic services from medical sources but are often not as aware of preventive medicine. “I remind them that there are screenings they should have, such as prostate cancer screening. A baseline at age 40 -- especially for African-Americans who are at higher risk -- is such a wise thing,” Kirschner advises.

Kirschner believes a man needs to engage in a conversation “with a primary care doc he trusts so his life is what he wants. Every person needs a patient-centered medical home to go back to where services are coordinated and centered.”

Male patients are more likely to talk about America’s obesity epidemic and getting fit rather than belly fat specifically. “Men are reluctant to talk about their weight,” he says, “so it comes out in sneakier ways!” Kirschner believes weight management is related to overall life style; diet, exercise, stress all play a part. “Working men have become victims of their own schedules. They need to be intentional about their choices -- and accountable.”

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Advocate Health Care

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June 15-21 Is National Men’s Health Week

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