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How to Lose Belly Fat

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There are a lot of annoying gimmicks about how to get rid of belly fat. While there's no "magic bullet" that will target abdominal fat in particular, this article will explain what causes an expanding waistline, and how you can make the spare tire go away.

Steps

Part One: Jump-Starting Your Metabolism

- Eat breakfast.** It might seem counterproductive to eat if you're trying to lose weight, but studies show that eating breakfast within an hour of waking up keeps your insulin levels steadier and your LDL cholesterol (the bad kind) levels lower.^[1]



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- Try to eat your breakfast around the same time each day. If you tend to sleep in on the weekends, eat as soon as you wake up.
- Consider including protein and high-fiber foods in your breakfast — because they take longer to process than refined sugars and complex carbs, you'll continue to feel full throughout the morning. Try eggs, peanut butter, and fresh fruit and vegetables.
- Avoid making sugary cereals, waffles, pancakes, french toast, breakfast pastries, or instant oatmeal the sole focus of your breakfast. If you're going to splurge and eat something with refined sugars, try to balance it with protein or fiber.

- Decompress.** Research indicates that the secretion of cortisol (a hormone your body produces during times of stress) is correlated with an increase in belly fat.^[2] Here are some strategies for combating everyday stress:

- Get enough sleep. Most adults need at least 7 hours of sleep every night to function properly.^[3]

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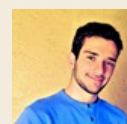


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- Set aside time to relax. Even if it's only 15 minutes on your lunch break, try to find time to simply close your eyes, breathe deeply, and forget your worries.
- Keep your stressors away from your sleeping area. If you can avoid it, don't do work or anything stressful in your bedroom. Tell yourself that the area is reserved for rest and relaxation, and resolve to leave your worries behind as soon as you step into the room.

3

Aim to take 10,000 steps a day. In a study where a group of men were asked to reduce their daily steps from about 10,000 to less than 1,500 (without changing their diet), their visceral (belly) fat increased by 7% after just 2 weeks.^[4]

- Get a pedometer and try to increase the number of steps you take each day.
- Take the stairs instead of the elevator. Walk instead of driving.
- Stand up and walk for 30 steps every 30 minutes. If you have a sedentary job, consider getting a treadmill desk.

4

Switch out refined grains for whole grains. In a scientific study, people who ate all whole grains (in addition to five servings of fruits and vegetables, three servings of low-fat dairy, and two servings of lean meat, fish, or poultry) lost more belly fat than another group that ate the same diet, but with all refined grains.^[5]



- Melt fat with grains. A diet rich in whole grains changes the glucose and insulin response in your body, which hastens the melting of fat, and visceral fat, that deep layer of fat, is easier for your body to burn than the subcutaneous fat under your skin (the fat that you can see and grab).
- Try to avoid "white" grains. For instance, purchase brown wheat bread instead of over-processed white bread, and favor wild brown rice over white rice.

5

Drink plenty of water. Studies suggest that consistently drinking water throughout the day can lead to a more active metabolism, regardless of dieting.^[6] Additionally, drinking more water helps your body flush out waste and toxins and improves your overall health.

- Aim to drink an 8-oz. glass of water 8 times per day, or 64 ounces total.
- Carry a water bottle with you so that you can drink whenever you feel thirsty.
- Know how to tell when you're sufficiently hydrated. It's a slightly gross metric, but you'll know you're drinking enough water when your urine runs almost clear. If it's still yellow, drink up.

Part Two: Exercising for Fat Loss

1

Exercise in small bursts. Research shows that interval training, or alternating short bursts of energy with brief resting periods, can improve muscle and build endurance more quickly than traditional exercise.^[7]

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- Try sprinting. Run as fast and as far as you can for 20 seconds, then slow to a walk until you catch your breath. Repeat for 10 minutes.
- Set a treadmill, elliptical or stationary bike for interval training. Most modern exercise equipment can be set to an interval training mode, which will significantly increase the difficulty of the exercise for short periods of time.
- Go for a quick walk. Fit some exercise into your work day by getting up from your desk and going for a 5-minute power walk. Take long strides and keep a brisk pace, or try going up and down a flight of stairs.

2

Skip the crunches — for now. Doing abdominal crunches and sit-ups *will* build strong muscles, but you might not be able to see them under the remaining belly fat. In fact, doing crunches might actually make your stomach look bigger as you build up thicker abs. Try these exercises to focus on your core muscles instead:

- Do the bridge. Get into the position for doing a push up/press up. Rest on your elbows and keep your eyes to the floor at all times. Pull your stomach muscles in tight, imagining them going to your backbone. As you do this, your bottom should be down and your back straight. Aim to hold this position for as long as it feels comfortable. During the holding period, don't arch your back but keep it as straight as possible. If it feels too hard at first, allow your knees to form a resting platform. Aim to hold the position for 30 seconds and repeat this exercise 3 to 5 times.
- Do squats. Stand with your feet 8-9 inches apart, extend your arms in front of you, and squat your hips backward. Do four sets of 15 to 20 squats, working several minutes at a time.
- Stretch the sides of your waist. Stand up straight, with your feet hip-width apart. Put your right hand on your right hip, and lift your left arm straight up, so that your palm is facing to the right. Keeping your legs centered, lean to the right and "reach" over with your left arm, stretching your left side. Do 3 to 5 times on each side.

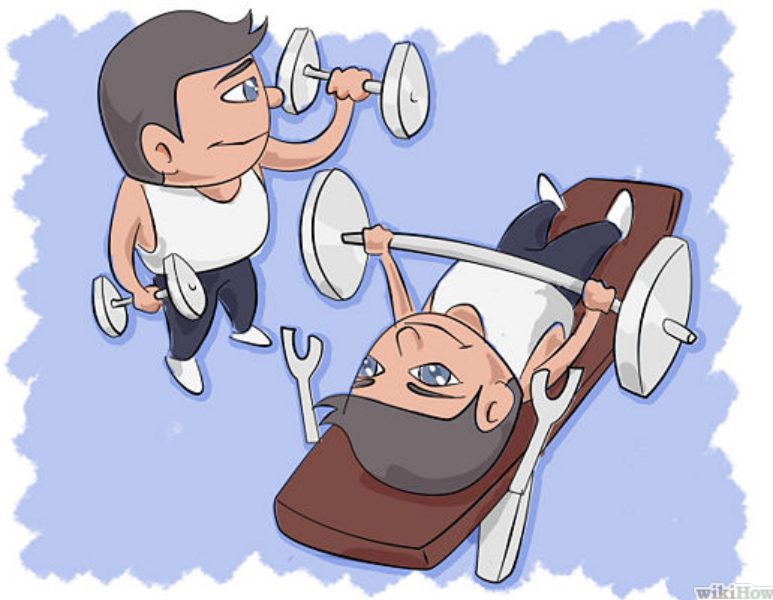
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Ramp up the cardio. Aerobic exercises, which get your heart pumping, burn calories quickly and will facilitate fat loss all over your body, including your belly. You can't "spot-burn" belly fat, but it's usually the first to burn off when you exercise, regardless of your body shape or size.^[8]

- Time your miles. Track your progress by timing how long it takes you to run a mile. As your cardiovascular stamina improves, you'll notice the time going down.
- Correct shin splints. If you get painful shin splints whenever you run, you're probably over-pronating (that is, putting the majority of your weight on the outer side of your foot when it comes down). Look for a pair of shoes designed specifically to help alleviate this.
- Don't overdo it. When you're first getting into cardio, aim to workout 3 days per week, then build up to 4 when you're ready. Pushing yourself hard every single day won't give your body enough time to recover and build up muscle, and could lead to injury.

4

Add resistance training. A 2006 study published in the International Journal of Sport Nutrition and Exercise Metabolism suggests that combining cardiovascular (aerobic) exercise with resistance training is more effective than cardiovascular training alone in getting rid of abdominal fat^[9] You can do resistance training with free weights, exercise machines, or resistance bands.



Part Three: Dieting for Fat Loss

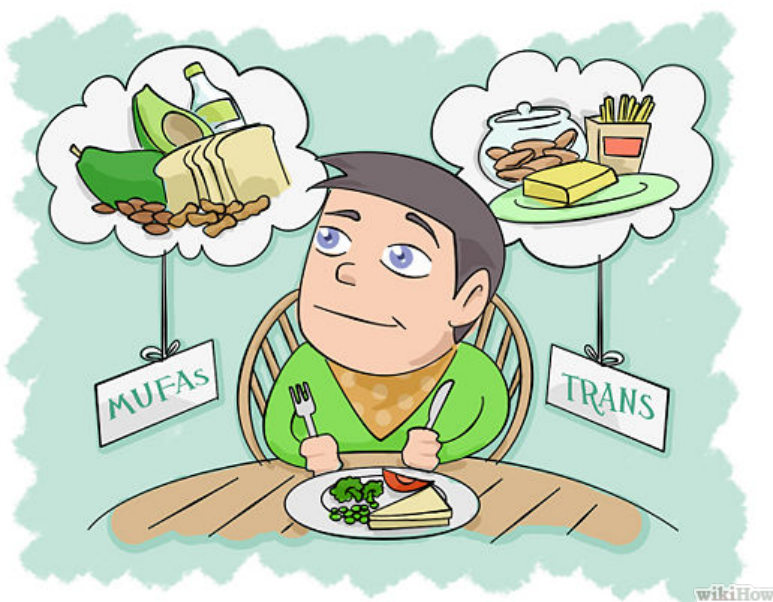
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Reduce your calorie consumption. Unless you restrict your calorie intake, you're not going to lose belly fat. Try out these tips:

- Remember that it takes a 3700-calorie deficit to lose one pound of fat. That is, you have to either burn off 3700 calories through exercise or eat 3700 calories less than you burn in a week.
- Aim to lose a maximum of two pounds per week. Losing any more than that can be unhealthy and lead to a cycle of "crash" dieting, in which you rapidly gain back any lost weight.
- Keep a food diary. Most people tend to underestimate how much they eat in a day. Get an honest assessment of your eating habits by writing down everything you consume for a week. Look up an online calorie calculator, and figure out roughly how many calories you're consuming in a day. From there, see what you can afford to cut.
- Try a diet in which you consume 2200 calories (men) or 2000 calories (women) per day. This should cause a deficit sufficient for you to lose one or two pounds per week, depending on your activity level.

2

Eat good fats. Studies suggest that a diet with a higher ratio of monounsaturated fats (MUFAs) — such as avocados, nuts, seeds, soybeans, and chocolate — can prevent the accumulation of belly fat.^[10]



- Trans fats (in margarines, crackers, cookies, or anything made with partially hydrogenated oils) seem to result in more fat being deposited in the abdomen, so avoid these as much as you can.^[11]

3

Get more fiber in your diet. Soluble fiber (such as that found in apples, oats, and cherries) lowers insulin levels, which, as mentioned earlier, can speed up the burning of visceral belly fat.^[12]

- Add fiber to your diet slowly. If you are currently getting 10 grams of fiber a day, don't jump to 35 grams of fiber the next day. You need to give the natural bacteria in your digestive system time to adapt to your new fiber intake.
- Leave the skin on your fruits and vegetables. Incorporating more fruits and vegetables into your diet will add fiber, but only if you eat the skin, because that's where all the fiber is. So don't peel those apples before you eat them. If you're eating potatoes, try to leave the skin in the dish (such as if making baked or mashed potatoes) or if you peel them, make a snack out of them, such as baked garlic Parmesan peels. It's also worth knowing that keeping the skin on potatoes when you cook them will help keep more vitamins and minerals in the flesh. Just don't eat any parts of skin that are green.
- Eat more split pea soup. Split peas are a fiber "power food". Just one cup of them contains 16.3 grams of protein.

Part Four: Measuring Progress

1

Calculate your waist-to-hip ratio. Your waist-to-hip ratio — or the circumference of your waist divided by the circumference of your hips — can be a good indicator of whether you need to lose belly fat. Here's how to get it:

- Wrap a soft tape measure around the thinnest part of your waist at the level of your navel. Note the measurement.
- Wrap the tape measure around the widest part of your hips, where you can feel a bony protrusion about 1/3 of the way from the top of the hipbone. Note the measurement.
- Divide your waist measurement by your hip measurement.
- Know what's healthy. Women should have a ratio of 0.8 or below; men should be at 0.9 or lower.^[13]

2

Continue to take your measurements as you progress. After you've incorporated some of the strategies mentioned above into your lifestyle, keep taking your measurements. Write them all down in the same place so you can see your progress as the inches melt away.



3

Weigh yourself at the same time each day. Because body weight can fluctuate depending on the time of day, when you last ate, or when your last bowel movement happened, try to standardize the process by weighing yourself at the same time each day. Many people choose to do it when they first wake up in the morning, before eating breakfast.

Part Five: Staying Motivated

1 Join forces with a friend. Trying to lose weight with a partner can help you stay accountable for your actions, as well as giving you an extra incentive to keep exercise appointments. Share your victories together, and discuss solutions to whatever roadblocks you encounter.

2 Understand risks associated with belly fat. Losing belly fat doesn't have to be solely a cosmetic goal; understanding the health issues linked with belly fat can help motivate you.

- Belly fat is linked with cardiovascular disease, **diabetes**, and cancer. Specifically it's the deepest layer of belly fat —the fat you can't see or grab — that poses health risks. That's because these "visceral" fat cells actually produce hormones and other substances that can affect your health (e.g. increased insulin resistance and/or breast cancer risk).[14]
- The fact that "visceral" fat cells are located right next to and in between organs in your abdominal cavity doesn't help. For example, fat next to the liver drains into it, causing a fatty liver, which is a risk factor for insulin resistance, setting the stage for **Type 2 diabetes**.^[15]

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Tips

- If you get lots of sweet cravings, replace sweets and sugar with fruits. The sugars in fruits are digested differently than the empty calories of white sugar that are in most candy and processed foods. The fiber in fruit also slows the absorption of the sugars so you don't get as high a sugar rush (and as low a crash).
- An easy way to burn more fat is to walk everywhere within a reasonable distance. You save money on gas, and also save wear and tear on your vehicle. And you might save parking charges and/or cab, bus or subway fares. All you need are comfortable shoes (take your dressier shoes with you in a bag if necessary) and walk, walk, walk. Pick up the pace as you get fitter to make those short journeys even quicker and smile at all the traffic traveling bumper to bumper in the rush hour. Biking is also a good option as you are working hard and getting to your destination faster.
- On days where you are feeling dragged down because you haven't slept much, make sure you get some lean proteins in your body. When we haven't slept, our bodies tend to crave sugar and "junk food." We can curtail this by getting lean proteins such as nuts and fish into our diet.
- Eat smaller dinners. You don't need to stop eating the things you like, but you should try eating smaller portions inch by inch. Large dinners tend to hurt a fat-loss process because most people aren't very active after dinner. This is the basis for advice along the lines of "don't eat anything within a certain number of hours before going to bed". The claim that your entire dinner is stored as fat isn't entirely true. The process is more complicated than that, but the fact that you don't move after dinner is enough to hurt your cause. You can offset this by eating a larger lunch or snacking healthily before dinner.
- If you're having trouble getting motivated to exercise, get halfway there. If you want to go to the gym, but just don't feel like it, at least just drive yourself to gym, and tell yourself that if you still don't feel like working out, you'll go home. Odds are, though, once you're there, you won't feel like driving home. (But if you do, that's OK too.) Then tell yourself you'll just walk on the treadmill for 10 minutes, even if your exercise routine involves much more. Just telling yourself to do one more thing, without having to commit to anything else, will make things much easier. And before long, your endorphins will take over.
- The way your body distributes fat is largely beyond control and can be dependent on factors such as genetics and menopause. What is within your control is your level of body fat overall — if you keep that low, it won't really matter where the fat goes, because there won't be much fat to deposit in the first place.
- If you don't have weights for resistance training, you can start by lifting anything heavy. Or, you can use gravity as resistance: do pull ups and push ups.
- Many women start gaining more weight in their belly as they get older, especially after menopause. The body fat distribution changes — less fat goes to your arms, legs and hips, and more of it goes to your midsection. Some people even find their waistline widening while their weight remains the same.^[14] Nonetheless, the above steps will help to do away with belly fat.

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Warnings

- Doing only sit-ups and crunches can actually cause the appearance of more belly fat, as the abdominal muscles grow in size and shape, they will push out against the fat, making it appear larger and thicker.
- If you've gained weight or been pregnant, you may have excess skin in the belly area that won't disappear no matter how much fat you burn. You will only know how much excess skin there is, though, if you get rid of all the fat first. It is also possible that your skin will tighten up again once you've lost the belly fat.

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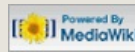
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