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Is Stress Making Your Waist Expand?

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You're out of breath, having just finished a round of crunches on your living room floor. You get up and head to the shower, pausing to assess your stomach in the bathroom mirror. Hmm. For some reason, it hasn't seemed to flatten even though you've cut down on the carbs, skipped dessert all week, made it to the gym three nights, and did crunches every morning. What is going on? Why is your hard work not paying off?

Stress is the likely culprit for your expanding waist. While stress brings with it a number of benefits including increased energy and motivation to take action, it becomes detrimental to both your body and mind when your level of stress outweighs your ability to cope. Chronic stress, the kind that lasts over several months or years, can wreak havoc on the balance of your body's hormones. One particular hormone released under stress, cortisol, has been shown to stimulate the storage of visceral, or deep layer, abdominal fat when released in excess.¹ Visceral fat is a concern because once it is created it tends to remain in place, pumping out chemicals that promote the storage of yet more fat and inflammation. Over time, in response to long-lasting stress, you are more likely to develop abdominal obesity, or the classic apple shape.

While the body's natural response to stress, the fight or flight response, may have been critical to the survival of our predecessors, today it typically leads to dysfunction. The main problem is that the body has a hard time keeping up with the degree of stress often experienced now. Today's fast paced society and modern conveniences such as cell phones, blackberries, text messages, email, and social media updates can keep us in a constant state of being "on" with little opportunity for rest. In addition, packed schedules have a tendency to keep us on the go. As a result of this constant deluge of stress, our bodies need to continually be ready for fight or flight and stress hormones such as cortisol are released at high rates, much higher than was needed centuries or even decades ago.

The excess energy created during these frequent encounters with stress builds up with little opportunity for release. How can you fight or run for your life, for example, when you are stuck

¹ Carol A. Shively, Thomas C. Register and Thomas B. Clarkson, "Social Stress, Visceral Obesity, and Coronary Artery Atherosclerosis: Product of a Primate Adaptation," *American Journal of Primatology* 71 (2009): 742-751.

behind the wheel of your car (excluding the option of road rage, of course)? As a result of this internalized energy, you can end up with a wide variety of stress-related ailments including upset stomach, muscle tension, headaches, and upper respiratory infections. Over time, these ailments can turn into bigger and more chronic diseases such as coronary heart disease and diabetes.

How can you keep up with the demands of life while managing your stress, your health and your waist? Consider a two-step process of removal and restoration to re-balance the function of your body and your mind. The removal of stress-*inducing* elements in your lifestyle clears space for you to restore balance with the addition of stress-*reducing* elements and the end result is more energy to cope with life.

First assess which elements most deplete your body. Diet, activity level, and sleep are the primary lifestyle factors that affect the body. Within diet this can mean skipping meals or eating in excess, consuming too much caffeine or alcohol, and choosing too many foods or beverages high in saturated fat and sugar. Within activity it can mean too much sitting or, on the opposite side of the spectrum, overtraining. And within sleep it can mean staying up too late at night or oversleeping on a regular basis. Determine what you can do to remove or diminish elements that have been, quite literally, exhausting your body.

Next take a look at your mind or thinking style. Become aware of recurring negative and self-defeating thoughts that have a tendency to play on autopilot and increase your anxiety in times of stress. Thoughts such as, “You aren’t smart enough to handle this,” or “You can’t do this,” may play quietly in the background as you pummel through a day’s events. When you become aware of these thoughts you can choose to stop them instead of giving them power and energy.

Once you have removed or diminished the hold that stressors have on your body and mind you can fill in the spaces with restorative choices. Within diet, eat at least three balanced meals even on days that your schedule doesn’t seem to allow it – those are the days when nutrition is even more critical for sustained energy and productivity. Having nutritious snacks on hand can help to maintain your energy when you are short on time. Opt for meals and snacks that have a combination of whole grain carbohydrates, fiber, protein, and healthy fats to supply your body with nutrients and keep you full. Have a bottle of water on hand to stay hydrated. Lastly, include omega-3 fatty acids found primarily in fish and fish oil supplements. Research has

shown promising associations between omega-3 fatty acids and mood.² Opt for 2-3 servings of fish per week, or the equivalent in a fish oil supplement or food fortified with omega-3 fatty acids such as some brands of eggs and cereals.

In your activity level, see where you can replace sitting with movement. Exercise is one of the best stress management techniques because it gives you a positive way to burn excess energy built up during stress. Even basic physical activity such as taking the stairs instead of the elevator, stretching at your desk, or gardening is beneficial because it gets your body moving and gives your mind a break. Choose activities that you enjoy. While many love running, biking, and weight lifting, these activities are not for everyone and forcing yourself to do something you hate will do nothing more than increase your level of stress and frustration. Walking, dance or group exercise classes, swimming and sailing are other options. In addition, yoga, tai chi, and other eastern practices such as reflexology and massage therapy offer many restorative benefits and are now widely available. Check out your local community listings for a yoga class or massage therapist.

And, finally, replace your negative and self-defeating thoughts with positive and affirming thoughts. The practice of catching negative thoughts early and quickly replacing them with positive thoughts is an empowering stress management strategy. Because thoughts often have a direct link to feelings, changing your thoughts can improve your feelings, including the degree of control you feel you have during stressful experiences. And the more control you feel you have, the better you can cope with stress. It may help to make a list of your common negative thoughts and identify alternative thoughts to replace them in advance so you are aware and ready when they occur under times of stress.

Finding the optimal balance of stress in your life is an ongoing practice. Learning to continually remove elements that deplete your energy and choose food and activities that restore your energy will improve your coping ability and your overall level of health and wellness. It is this balanced lifestyle that will give you the necessary energy to lead a productive, happy, and healthy life with a waist you can be proud of.

² Brian M. Ross, Jennifer Seguin and Lee E. Sieswerda, "Omega-3 Fatty Acids as Treatments for Mental Illness: Which Disorder and Which Fatty Acid?" Lipids in Health and Disease, Sept. 2007, 20 Sept. 2010 <<http://www.lipidworld.com/content/6/1/21>>.