

DEALING WITH BELLY FAT

Dr Kolawole Oluseyi Akande

MBChB (Ife), MSc (Ib) FWACP (Int. Med-Gastroenterol) MRCP (Glasg)

Introduction

Fat is one of the nutrients the body requires in large amount (Macro- nutrients). Fat acts as a source of energy to the body. The body also stores excess energy in form of fat in the adipose tissues mainly underneath the skin.

The Belly (Abdomen in Medical term) is that part of the body that is between the chest and the beginning of the lower limbs.

Belly fat is excessive accumulation of fat in the abdomen. This accumulation may be under the skin (Subcutaneous fat) or within the abdominal cavity (Visceral fat). Belly fat is also called abdominal or central or truncal or android obesity. Visceral fat is said to be more dangerous than subcutaneous fat.

Belly fat is a public health problem in Nigeria affecting about 45% of the adult population according to a study done in an urban Nigerian city.

What are the implications of belly fat?

If excessive fat in the body is bad, then belly fat is worst. This is because belly fat is metabolically active leading to release of many substances (Inflammatory mediators and free fatty acids) that reduce the efficiency of the liver, among other things. This then lead to many adverse health outcomes and associations including heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, abnormal lipids in the blood, narrow blood vessels (Coronary and peripheral Artery Diseases), sleep apnea, stroke, cancers (Breast, prostate, colon and endometria), reproductive disorders, reduced life expectancy, gall bladder disease etc.

What are the causes of belly fat?

Obesity occurs as a result of a complex interaction between genetic and environmental factors. Older age, male sex, menopause in women, Diets high in calorie, smoking and Race are some of the predisposing factors to belly fat. The older one becomes the more the tendency to accumulate belly fat. This might also due to the fact that older people are generally less active than younger people. Male tend to accumulate belly fat especially visceral fat than female although the difference tend to disappear with women attaining menopause. Diets that are

high in calorie including alcohol tend to predispose to belly fat since the body store excess calorie as fat. Underneath the skin is the appropriate area for the storage of this fat but it spill over to other parts including the abdomen once the subcutaneous areas is saturated. Energy dense foods have become more available and accessible in our environment day by day. Sedentary behavior or inactive lifestyles which again are common these days promote accumulation of body fat. Belly fat is said to be commoner among the Asians than the Africans. These may reflect genetic and dietary predispositions of these races.

What are the ways of detecting belly fat?

Belly fat can be detected using the waist circumference, waist hip ratio, specialized tests including abdominal CT and MRI. Waist circumference measurement is simple and requires the use of just tape measure mid-way between the last rib and the pelvic bone. This should be less than 88cm in Females and 102 in males according to the World Health Organization.

Dealing with belly fat

A combination of exercise, dietary therapy and behavioural modification is probably the most effective method in dealing with belly fat either to prevent or to treat. There is also a place for drugs and surgery.

Exercise

There is an inverse relationship between body weight and the amount of physical activities. This is because exercise requires energy which is supplied mainly by carbohydrate and fat. Exercise thus is a potent stimulus of fat breakdown in the body. The more the duration of the exercise, the more fat is used up. Men tend to lose more weight during exercise than women. Some of the recommended aerobic exercise include brisk walking, cycling, jogging, Rowing, skating, Tread mill, swimming etc. Brisk walking for 30-60 minutes most days of the week is most popular because it is simple, safe and cheap. Exercise has to be continuous to maintain the weight reduction. Appetite also tend to increase after exercise and one must be careful to eat the right thing otherwise work done might be zero.

Diet

Diet is important both in the prevention and treatment of belly fat. There are different types of weight losing dietary regimen including very low fat diet, low fat diet, Low carbohydrate diet, High protein diet etc depending on the proportion of the daily calorie that is supplied by each nutrient type. A chat with a Dietician or clinical nutritionist might be of help to specific individual. The general rule is to reduce high calorie containing food like melon, white rice, white bread, palm oil, pounded yam, highly processed food, carbonated drinks, ground nut,

Fufu, garri, alcohol etc. Foods that are low in calorie are fruits, vegetables; nuts, local rice etc are to be encouraged. Please note that both the type and the portion of food matter in determining the amount of calorie that is given to the body. The level of activity of the individual is also taken into consideration. Starvation is not a good way to lose weight. It may even worsen it when the individual get back to eat. The type of processing and the extent of processing of the food also contribute to the amount of calorie the food release to the body. The more processed the food the more the calorie content. For instance food juice will give more calorie than unprocessed fruit. Fried food will give more calorie than boiled food. So it is better to boil than fry.

Activities that increase the amount of energy loss also contribute to prevention and treatment of belly fat. This include walking up to the TV instead of using remote control, getting down at a bus-top before the destination, pounding yam instead of using pounding machine, manual washing instead of washing machines, using staircase instead of elevator or escalator, winding generator to start it instead of using remote or button, driving a manual car instead of automatic. These can be done at least once a week. Smoking should be avoided as it increases the tendency to have belly fat. Alcohol should also be avoided as it is rich in calorie even more than carbohydrate!

There is a place for drugs and surgery like jaw wiring, bariatric surgery, jaw wiring, abdominal wall surgery, liposuction etc. These are usually for severe cases that are resistant to the combination of diet and exercise alone.

In conclusion, belly fat has a lot of poor health outcomes and associations. It occurs as a result of complex interaction between gene and the environment. It is however largely preventable and treatable by diet, exercise and behavioural changes.

