

'Beer bellies' may brew trouble for men

STORY BY MONICA DIXON, PH.D., R.D.

It's no secret that obesity is widespread — nearly three out of every four men are either overweight or obese, according to the Centers for Disease Control, but that "beer belly" may cause men more problems beyond just buying a larger pair of jeans.

A waist size larger than 40 inches indicates a man is at high risk of type-2 diabetes and heart disease.

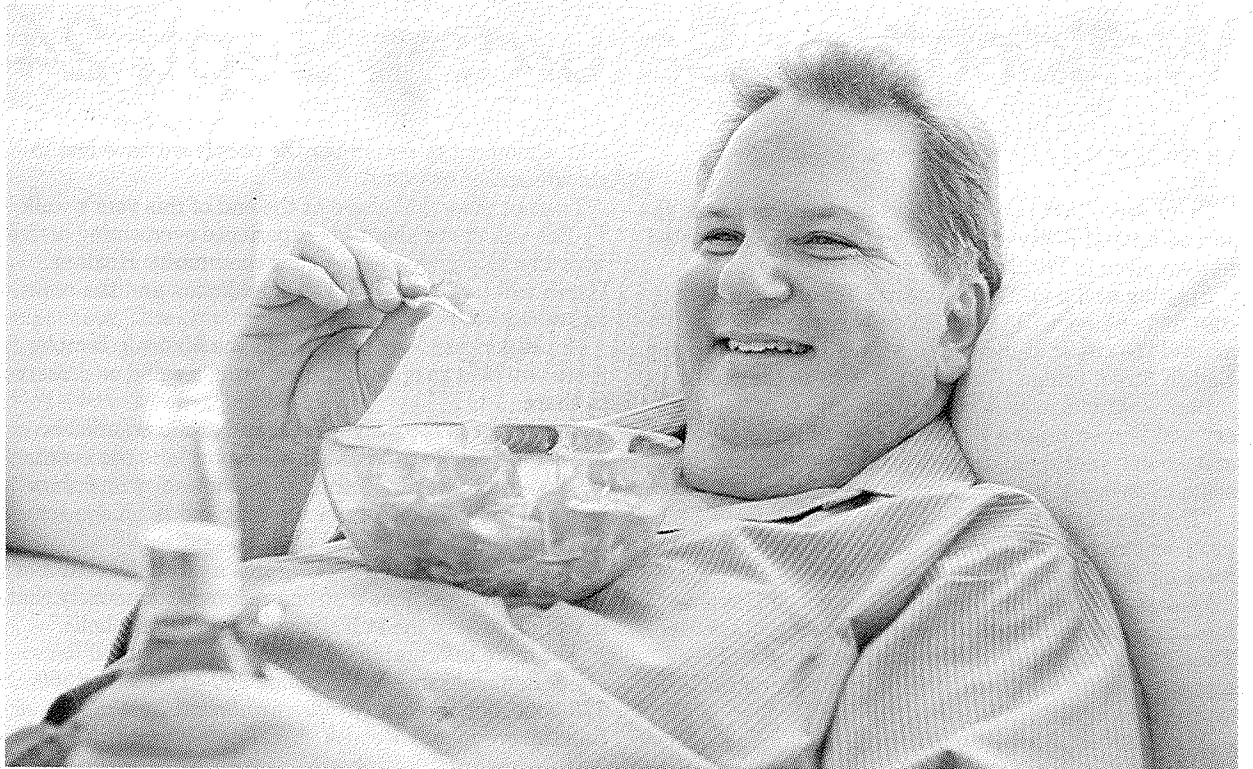
Most women who gain weight will find it goes to the hips and thighs, but in men extra weight finds its way to the belly.

This fat, called visceral fat — unlike the subcutaneous fat that resides just under the skin on the abdomen, hips, thighs and arms — secretes hormones and compounds that raise inflammation, which contributes to chronic-disease risk.

This can spell bad news when, according to the American Heart Association, more than one in three adult men has some form of cardiovascular disease.

Aging doesn't help. After age 40, the natural reduction in testosterone means excess calories are stored as visceral fat. Add to that the gradual loss in muscle mass as we age — about 1 pound per year after age 30 — and our metabolism continues to decline, making it easier to gain weight in general, but going straight to the belly in men.

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The good news is that visceral fat is particularly responsive to classic diet and exercise changes.

Here's some simple ideas to begin to whittle down that belly:

- Ditch the sugar-sweetened beverages.

While eating too many calories of any food will contribute to weight gain, some in particular lead to more belly gain than others, and sugar is one of them.

Sugar-sweetened drinks, including soda, fruit juice and punch, energy drinks and many of the concoctions made at your favorite coffee stop can be loaded with sugar and empty calories that find their way right to your waistline.

Substitute water, unsweetened iced tea or sparkling waters instead.

And if you're a dad, this is a great move to adopt for the whole family, as sugar-sweetened beverages are harmful to children, too.

- Pay attention to your dietary fat.

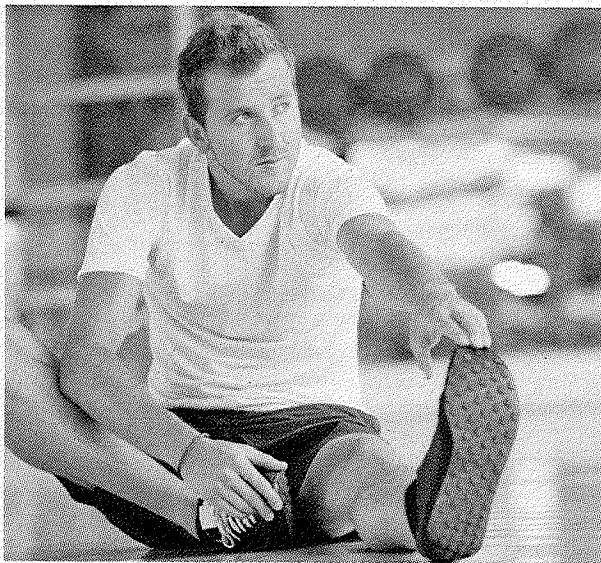
Saturated fat — the kind found in fatty cuts of meat and full-fat dairy products — also has been found to increase belly fat.

Choose more polyunsaturated fats, such as nuts, salmon and seeds and opt for leaner cuts of meat at mealtime, such as flank steak, chicken and fish.

- Eat more whole grains.

In a 2010 issue of the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, researchers found that increased intake of refined grains correlated with a greater amount of belly fat, while increasing whole grains did not.

Eat brown rice, quinoa, whole grain breads and pastas instead of white rice, white breads and pasta.



- Reduce screen time.

Screens have become a large part of our lives, and many believe so much time spent sedentary in front of screens has contributed to the obesity epidemic.

Make it a goal to spend no more than two hours a day in recreational screen time activities (time at the office working is a different matter).

Get up out of the chair at half time or the seventh-inning stretch and go for a brisk walk or do a few push-ups to increase body strength.

Plug in a headset and take calls while you walk around the block. Set a timer on your game station to

remind you when its time to quit and go do something more active.

- Up your produce intake.

Regardless of the abundance of ads on the internet offering instant weight-loss potions, none have yet been found to be more powerful than increasing your intake of fruit and vegetables.

Because they are packed with water and nutrients, foods like leafy greens, celery, tomatoes, watermelon, pineapple and citrus fruits fill you up while keeping your energy levels high.

For men who are moderately active, the Produce for Better Health Foundation recommends two cups of fruits daily and three-and-a-half cups of vegetables for optimum health.

- Skip the treadmill.

If you want to lose a belt size, performing intervals during your workout can help you lose more belly fat than steady-state cardio, according to researchers.

These workouts, much shorter in duration, alternate between moderate and speedy bursts of exercise. Rather than heading out for an hour-long run, run, walk or bike at a moderate pace for a few minutes and then look ahead and sprint to the best of your ability to the next mailbox or light pole. Once you reach your goal, reduce back to your moderate speed, catch your breath and begin looking for your next goal.

- Beware of booze.

Though there's often nothing better at the end of a long day of work than a drink or two, alcohol can cause havoc with your weight and belly fat.

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