

- Obesity / Health

Middle-aged spread's a heart risk – even if your BMI's fine

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MIDDLE-Aged spread increases the risk of heart disease even if you're deemed to be at a healthy weight, experts warn. They say calculating the waist-to-hip ratio in patients may be a better indicator of risk than the traditionally used body mass index (BMI).

This is because someone with a high BMI may be muscular or carrying their fat away from the body's vital organs. But a new scientific statement from the American Heart Foundation says abdominal obesity has been linked to a greater accumulation of fat around the liver, which often leads to non-alcoholic fatty liver disease. This increases the risk of cardiovascular disease and can result in a heart attack or stroke, it says. For example, a study carried out by the University of Loughborough found a 22 percent higher risk of death in those with an overweight middle but normal BMI. A waist-to-hip ratio is calculated by dividing your waist circumference by hip circumference.

The World Health Organisation defines obesity using this ratio as a value higher than 0.85 in women and 1.0 in men. Dr Tiffany Powell Wiley, chairman of the statement writing committee, said: 'Studies that have examined the relationship between abdominal fat and cardiovascular outcomes confirm that visceral fat is a clear health hazard... The obesity epidemic contributes significantly to the global burden of cardiovascular disease and numerous chronic health conditions that also impact heart disease.'

Researchers suggest restricting calorie intake and doing 150 minutes of activity a week to lose fat, with a focus on aerobic exercise.

The NHS already warns those with a large waist should try to lose weight as they are at increased risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, cancer and stroke.

It says: 'You can have a healthy BMI and still have too much tummy fat, meaning you're still at risk of developing these diseases.'

The AHA's advice, published in the journal *Circulation*, does not specify a healthy waist-to-hip ratio or indicate the degree of risk.