

- Weight loss

Can you really target belly fat for weight loss?

There's a lot of advice about exactly what you should do to shift that spare tyre around your waist. Does any of it add up?

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We've all seen the adverts. 'This one, simple trick will blitz the blubber around your belly'; 'Turn your body into a furnace and burn off your spare tyre with this diet hack'; 'Get Adonis abs by doing this five-minute workout'. But exactly how sceptical of their claims should we be? What does science actually tell us about getting rid of belly fat?

Well, the first thing to say is that not all fat is bad. To maintain good health, it's critical that our bodies can store excess energy, and they do this using fat. Fat tissue is also structurally important

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in our bodies – it helps keep us warm through insulation and it cushions the palms of our hands, the soles of our feet and, yes, our bottoms. The fat just under our skin, known as sub-

cutaneous fat and often found on the hips and buttocks, can be healthy. Ultimately, without any fat storage in our bodies, we would be unwell and very uncomfortable.

That said, losing excess belly fat is a good idea. A sizeable gut could indicate a person is carrying a large amount of 'deep' abdominal fat, known as visceral fat, which can surround our organs and make us more likely to be ill. Visceral fat is more insulin-resistant than other fat tissue – meaning it's worse at absorbing blood glucose. It's also more linked to inflammation and is more likely to release fats into the blood in response to stress hormones, increasing a person's risk of metabolic disease.

There are various ways to see if your levels of visceral fat are high, but the easiest is to check your waist-hip ratio. Using a tape measure, measure the widest part of your hips and the narrowest part of your waist, then divide the your waist measurement by your hip measurement. According to the World Health Organization, the healthy ratios for men and women are below 1 and 0.85 respectively (the difference is due to women having broader hips).

READY, AIM...

So, how hard is it to target this abdominal tissue? Well, that's not really up to you because where your body stores (and loses) fat depends on factors largely outside of your control. Not only that, but the ability to make fat cells, and where in the body those fat cells are made, varies widely between people.

Biological sex makes a big difference here – the healthy amount of body fat for women is about 10 per cent higher than for men. This has to do with different factors, including hormones, and is linked to reproductive health. Essentially, this fat is required during pregnancy and breastfeeding (both processes that require a lot of energy) and women who have very low body fat can struggle with infertility.

We also know from large-scale genetic studies, and from studies of siblings and twins, that genes probably play an important part in body fat distribution. So far, there have been over 300 individual genetic differences found associated with the waist-hip ratio, and scientists are still working on what these differences do. This means the variability in different people's natural body shape isn't something we can really change – at least in terms of fat.

So when it comes to losing belly fat, it's going to be more of a challenge for some people than it is for others, because of where their bodies naturally store fat. Weight loss in general can help you to reduce abdominal fat and your waist-hip ratio, because if you lose weight you lose it from your entire body, including your belly (if that's where you naturally store fat). Most of the 'tips and tricks' advertised as targeting belly fat exploit this: you lose weight everywhere, but you're primed to notice it on your belly.

HOW TO FIGHT A LOSING BATTLE

Put simply, weight loss is achieved by burning more calories than you consume. But that isn't easy for everyone because, just like with body fat, hunger varies a great deal between people and is strongly influenced by a number of factors, including your genes. Hence, some people will find it easier to stick to certain diet or exercise plans than others.

There are a few strategies that may make it easier, however. One of these is intermittent 'fasting', which comes in several forms. For instance, on the 5:2 diet you eat a 'normal' amount for five days a week (according to the NHS, the recommended daily calorie intake is 2,500 for men and 2,000 for women), but on two days you 'fast' by reducing your daily calorie intake to around 800. Other time-restricted eating schemes involve only allowing yourself a 10-hour window in which to eat during each 24-hour day.

Which works best? Well, it could be any of them: a meta-analysis published in *Obesity* in 2023 found that these different intermittent fasting plans all work to lower how much we eat. You may have seen claims that cutting down on a specific macronutrient is key to losing belly fat – think about the lowcarb, or ketogenic, diet recommendations. Unfortunately, there's simply not enough evidence to say dietary changes can target fat loss in a particular area of the body.

It's the same story with weight-loss drugs. While there is some evidence that drugs such as pioglitazone could work by indirectly targeting visceral fat, it's only currently used to treat diabetes.

WORK IT OFF

While increasing your energy expenditure through exercise can help with weight loss, some studies show that this can also increase your appetite, but, again, this differs between people. Many people find high-intensity interval training (HIIT) a convenient way to build fitness and burn calories in a short space of time and a major meta-analysis carried out by French scientists in 2018 found that HIIT does help to reduce fat deposits in men and women. But there's no evidence that a certain exercise can specifically target belly fat, even when performed at high intensity. Exercise can tone and build muscle in a targeted way, though, and this can influence body shape, but not by changing body fat distribution. In other words, it's much better to get your entire body moving than to just focus on situps, for example.

So, while you can't tell your body to prioritise belly fat if you're losing weight, you can reach your goal with a consistent exercise regime – and being kind to yourself during any slip-ups! "There's no evidence that a certain exercise can specifically target belly fat, even when performed at a high intensity"