



August 21, 2010 – Grand Rapids, MI

Waist Size and Mortality

Many of you responded to the Wednesday message *Bellies on Display*. But there is more to the research article I cited and today, it's time for the rest of the story, to quote Paul Harvey.

The Study

This is the type of research I like—straightforward without too much statistical mumbo jumbo. The subjects were participants in the Cancer Prevention Study II Nutrition Cohort and included over 100,000 people 50 and older (1). The benefit is that death notifications for subjects are automatically forwarded to the researchers via the National Death Index. From there, cause of death is determined via death certificates or cause-of-death codes.

In this part of the study, subjects were asked to provide their height and weight at different times during the study. They were also give a tape measure and took their waist measurement just above the navel. Are there problems with self reporting data? Sure, but that's why large numbers are important in this case—the bias is spread over so many people. Regression to the mean is a good thing in this case because outliers will be neutralized.

I gave you part of the results in the last message. If you're a man with a waist over 39 inches or a women with a waist over 35 inches, it's time to get to work at reducing that. But waist size is important no matter what your Body Mass Index (BMI). The assumption is that waist circumference only applies to people who are overweight or obese. This study showed that assumption is wrong.

Even when your BMI is in the normal range—18.5 to 24.9—if your waist is greater than 35 inches but less than 39 inches for men, you have a 14% greater mortality risk—and just to be very clear, guys, “mortality risk” means risk of dying in the next 10 years. For women with normal BMI, if your waist is greater than 29.5 inches but less than 33.5 inches, your 10-year mortality risk is 24% higher. As you would expect, the greater the waist size, the higher the mortality risk even if you have a normal BMI. And for sure, the higher the BMI and the higher the waist size, the greater your risk is.

What This Means to You

It's difficult to imagine how someone could have a normal BMI yet carry too much belly fat. Remember, most subjects in this study were over 50. The loss of muscle mass in the upper body and legs and the increase in body fat in the abdominal area as we age is very real. It's a natural process that we have to work against.

We all make fun (at least in our heads) of the guy who seems to keep the waist of pants right below his chest to cover his belly—although keeping your pants below a big belly so you can claim a smaller pant size doesn't make a very attractive fashion statement either. This study shows that belly size doesn't have to be quite that extreme for the risk to increase.

But here's another point. You know how you always complain that you're big boned and the BMI doesn't seem to apply to you? Well, if you have the waist size to prove it, you've been correct. If your BMI is in the overweight category, and your waist is less than 35 inches for men and 29.5 for women, you're not at increased mortality risk. If your BMI shows you're obese, your waist should be the same for men—less than 35 inches and less than 33.5 for women to avoid the increased mortality risk. I hope you big-boned people feel vindicated—if your waist size backs up your assertion.

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The Bottom Line

Several messages ago I talked about alternative metrics to use to assess your progress in getting healthy and fit because sometimes the scale doesn't move as much as we'd like. This study proves that losing those inches may be just as important and maybe even more important than losing weight. The effort is worth it.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

Reference: Arch Int Med 2010;170(15)1293-1301

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