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Men's Top 5 Gut-Busting Diet Mistakes

You tell yourself you are putting in the work to slim down your midsection, but the mirror is telling you something entirely different.

There's your belly, hanging over your belt. What's that about?

Before you just forget the belt, remember that there's more at stake than looking buff. Excess belly fat can tag along with a laundry list of chronic conditions, including heart disease , diabetes , and high blood pressure .

There are plenty of reasons why your efforts to flatten your stomach may be falling flat -- starting with these mistakes in what, how, or when you eat.

I'll Work It Off

If you're eating and drinking more calories than you're burning off, you're heading in the wrong direction. And though you may be confident that you can make up for it in the gym, think twice.

Exercise is not enough. This is something that Brett White, MD, a family medicine physician at Oregon Health and Science University in Portland, often tells his patients who need to reduce the size of their midsection.

"There's a mythology about the role of exercise in weight loss ," White says. "Even if they get a bike or a treadmill, they still have to change their diet . Exercise is critical for cardiovascular health but realistically, to lose weight , it starts with what we put in our mouths."

In his practice, San Francisco-based dietician Manuel Villacorta, RD, MS, founder of the weight management web site [eatingfree.com](#), sees many men in their 40s and older who have discovered the shortcomings of exercise in their weight loss efforts.

"It's what worked before," Villacorta says, "but now they are finding that it doesn't have the same effect."

Of course, you need to be active to lose weight and to keep it off. Just don't count on exercise alone to cover your calories -- especially when you're packing away too much, too often.

Eating Whenever

Not only do you have to watch what you eat, you have to pay attention to when you eat.

Eating on the run rather than according to your body's natural rhythm may contribute to weight gain . By eating at odd hours, you may be throwing off the brain signals that tell you when you are hungry and when you are satisfied, and that just might lead to eating more than you should.

Many people, Villacorta says, skip meals, thinking that cutting back on the number of meals they eat will help them slim down. That's not true.

"Some of my heaviest clients eat fewer meals in a day," Villacorta says.

What happens when you put off eating is your metabolism starts to slow down and your body begins to store fat. And, the bulk of that fat gets stored in your midsection, Villacorta says.

"Anything that affects the metabolic rate will contribute to fat build-up," Villacorta says.

Your metabolism slows down naturally as part of the aging process, he says. Although there may be nothing you can do about that, you can make sure to keep it as active as possible by eating regularly. That means breakfast , lunch, and dinner, with healthy snacks in between.

White agrees. "Ideally, you want your body to run like a machine, fueling it regularly throughout the day," he says.

Man-Sized Meals

This is an obvious one, but controlling portion size is key to controlling the size of your gut. This is a lot easier to do if you stick to good timing practices, because you are less likely to overdo it if you don't let yourself get too hungry to begin with.

"Excessive hunger is often followed by gorging," White says.

Your three meals, Villacorta says, should be no more than 700 calories each. A cup of steel-cut oats with a cup of blueberries and a tablespoon of walnuts makes a great power breakfast. Lunch and dinner should be 4-5 ounces of lean meat for protein or a similarly sized serving of omega-3 rich fish, such as salmon, with veggies and a whole grain like quinoa or brown rice. And for your mid-morning and mid-afternoon snacks, skip the chips and cookies. Instead, eat an apple and a cup of nonfat Greek yogurt.

In White's experience, the healthier the food you eat, the more of it you can allow yourself.

"People think that dieting means eating less; they envision hunger," he says. "But if you move from steak and potatoes to fruits and vegetables , you can actually eat more."

You also want to move away from processed foods. They may be quick to prepare, but they can contribute to weight gain because they are often higher in fat and sugar than are

whole foods .

Stress-Related Eating

Stress , which may put you at risk of diseases such as heart disease and depression , can also contribute to weight gain.

Stress affects how you think. If you are consumed by thoughts of an upcoming meeting with your boss or worried about how you are going to make your mortgage payments, it's less likely that you are going to have the mental energy to compose a healthy menu for yourself each day.

Instead, when you are feeling anxious, you are more likely to turn to sweet, fatty foods like candy and cookies.

"Stress is a huge problem," Villacorta says. "And not just big stress, but everyday stress caused by missed alarms and running late."

So if you want to be able to loosen your belt, you have to take steps to control your stress levels. And that's not just about what goes on your plate.

For his own stress, Villacorta follows his therapist's recommendation and does some simple relaxation exercises. Twice a day, he spends a few minutes taking deep breaths.

"I started doing that, and it was amazing," he says. "Stress is going to be there," Villacorta says, "but you can still learn to be healthy."

Overlooking Liquid Calories

Before you reach for another soda or pour yourself a cup of juice, take a look at the nutrition label and see how many calories you'll be consuming. You may be surprised to learn that an 8-ounce serving of each is 100 calories or more. Considering how much fluid your body needs in a day, you could be flooding it with gut-expanding calories.

The better option when thirst strikes is to down a glass of water. And if you drink milk, opt for the skim or low-fat varieties. You're still getting the calcium and vitamin D you need, but without the added calories.

"You want to move away from whole milk, and consume large amounts of water rather than juice," White says.

It's even more important to go easy on alcohol. Aside from the obvious health reasons to avoid excess drinking, alcohol is not easy on your midsection -- and not just because of its calories.

"When you drink, your inhibitions go down," Villacorta says. "You stop caring and hunger starts to strike."

That's a dangerous combination. Consider yourself warned.

SOURCES: Brett White, MD, family physician, Oregon Health & Science University, Portland. Manuel Villacorta, MS, RD, CSSD, owner/founder MV Nutrition and eatingfree.com, San Francisco. Harvard Health Publications: "Why People Become Overweight." Mayo Clinic: "Weight Loss Help: Gain control of emotional eating." Mayo Clinic: Stress: Constant stress puts your health at risk."

Reviewed by [Laura J. Martin, MD](#) on 4/14/2011

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