

MINT-Delhi

THE DREADED MIDDLE SPREAD

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BY VASUDHA RAI

There was a time when a big belly was seen as a sign of prosperity, something achieved after years of hard work, but these days it's everywhere, with even teenagers and small children falling victim to the dreaded middle spread. The trend is certainly worrying.

In July, National Family Health Survey data showed that as many as 30 million Indians, a fifth of them schoolchildren, are overweight. And it is common knowledge that being overweight is one of the precursors to a big belly.

For years now, scientists have linked a big

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belly with various life-threatening ailments. Research conducted in March 2007 by the Washington University School of Medicine in St Louis suggests that fat in the belly may be an important promoter of inflammation, which in turn causes diabetes, heart disease and other disorders.

Of course, this isn't exactly breaking news; it's something doctors and researchers have suspected all along. You don't need a degree in organic chemistry to go to the root of the rotund tummy. A sedentary lifestyle, wrong choice of food, irregular eating habits and bad posture are all responsible. So you can get rid of that belly by just changing a few habits.

Cut out the junk food

When it comes to food, be aware. Take note of obvious culprits such as fried fare, refined carbs and simple sugars, as well as sauces, dressings and relishes. Says Seema Sondhi, expert, The Yoga Studio, New Delhi, "Ketchup, for instance, contains huge amounts of salt and sugar—salt makes you retain more water, which results in bloating, and sugar makes you pile on the pounds." Ditto for dressings such as mayonnaise that can turn a perfectly healthy salad into junk because of the mix of eggs, cream, sugar and salt. In fact, certain snacks masquerading as health foods, such as low-fat potato chips or diet *chivda* (made from rice) are essentially simple carbs that convert quickly into sugar.

Stay active

Lack of exercise and a desk-bound culture add fuel to the fat. Says Prashant Talwalkar, CEO, Talwalkars Better Value Fitness Ltd, Mumbai, "Not exercising leads to poor metabolism, lethargy and lax muscles, all of which contribute to fat accumulation." Sitting for long periods means that most of this accumulation happens on the waistline. Especially for women, who tend to lose muscle mass as soon as they turn 30—this leads to a sluggish metabolism.

So just the right food isn't enough. While a low-fat diet will take the pounds off, it will do nothing to tone the stomach, which can only happen through the right exercise that builds muscle. What's more, a sedentary lifestyle almost

bellies look like they have a full house upfront.

Diet dos

There is no diet or specific food that specifically targets a heavy stomach. Belly fat is, however, the first to go while losing weight. Says Ritika Samaddar, head of nutritional therapy, Max Super Speciality Hospital, New Delhi, "Whether you're apple-shaped or pear-shaped with wide hips and thighs, when you lose weight you'll most likely lose more from the abdominal region than elsewhere." This must serve as an inspiration for those about to embark on a new fitness routine.

According to Talwalkar, a healthy meal comprises 60% fibre, 10% fat, 15% protein, and 15% carbohydrates. Instead of two primary meals such as lunch and dinner, have six small meals with a gap of 3 hours.

Says Samaddar, "A study in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, published in 2009, states that a calorie-controlled diet rich in wholegrains trimmed extra fat from the waistline." Study participants who ate only wholegrains (in addition to five servings of fruits and vegetables, three servings of low-fat dairy and two servings of lean meat, fish or poultry) lost more weight from the abdominal area than another group that ate the same diet, but with refined grains. This happened because eating a diet rich in wholegrains while reducing refined carbohydrates changes the glucose and insulin response and makes it easier to mobilize stored fat.

Samaddar's meal suggestions: Oats porridge in the morning with an egg or two egg whites and a cup of milk for breakfast. Fillers must come from fresh vegetables, fruits or a handful of nuts. Lunch must be a balance between multi-grain *rotis*, vegetables, *dal*, salad and curd. You can swap the *roti* with brown rice or multigrain bread and ensure that you consume whole *dals* with skin. Dinner must be protein and vegetables only. Go for lean meat, chicken, turkey, egg whites, steamed fish, all of which can also be tossed in with a huge salad.

Exercise essentials

Says Talwalkar, "The key to a

moves; but if your body fat is too high, it won't matter how wisely you work your abs—they won't show. That's why you need to add those moves to a full body strength and cardio routine." The spine, he says, is already flexed—don't make it worse. If your day is spent hunched over a computer, your spine is in a constantly flexed position, leading to poor posture and a weak core. Therefore, spine-flexing exercises such as crunches will just worsen the problem. "Crunches work your abs, but for the biggest benefits you need to work your entire core, which includes the stomach and abdomen that is made up of the four layers of the abs." He suggests three exercises:

► Plank with leg lift

Get into a modified push-up position with your weight resting on your forearms and toes, elbows directly beneath your shoulders. Your body should form a straight line from your neck to your ankles. From that position, brace your core and lift one foot off the floor. You can hold that position for the entire set, 60-90 seconds, and then do the second set with the other leg raised, or switch legs within 30-40 seconds in case you can't sustain the position.

► Side plank

Lie on your left side with your legs straight and your right leg stacked on your left. Position yourself so your weight is resting on your left forearm and the outside edge of your left foot. Your elbow should be directly beneath your shoulder, and your upper arm should be perpendicular to the floor. Align your body so it forms a straight line from your neck to your ankles, and place your right hand on your hip. Hold for 30-45 seconds, then switch sides and repeat.

► Mountain climber

Place your hands on a stable bench/rod, roughly 18-24 inches apart, and extend your legs behind you in a push-up position, with your body forming a straight line from your neck to your ankles. Raise your right foot off the floor and slowly bring your right knee up towards your chest, then lower it. That's one rep. Repeat with the left leg, and continue alternating until you've done 10-12 reps with each leg.

POSTURE POINTERS

How to improve your carriage

No amount of diet or exercise can help you get that flat stomach if you have a bad posture. A hunch pushes the stomach out even if it is naturally flat. To improve posture, Prashant Talwalkar, CEO, Talwalkars Better Value Fitness Ltd, Mumbai, suggests a simple routine: Grab a bottle filled with water in each hand, one heavier than the other (same weights held in both hands will not be core-specific and provide the required results), and hold them overhead, palms facing each other. Keep your core engaged and slowly walk forward 10-20 steps, moving from heel to toe as you step. Switch the weights and repeat. Rest for 60-90 seconds, then repeat for a total of two sets.

Inversely, a flabby stomach has direct consequences on your back. Says Seema Sondhi, expert, The Yoga Studio, New Delhi, "Because your spine is supported by your belly, all back problems are directly caused by a soft stomach that cannot prop up your spine." Yoga is a worthy ally to both improve posture and reduce flab. Sondhi suggests two asanas that even novices can try safely:

Awkward Chair pose

► Stand with feet together and arms by your side. Inhale and raise your arms, palms facing inward, or join the palms up towards the ceiling.
► Exhale and bend your knees, trying to keep the thighs as parallel to the floor as possible. The knees will project out over the feet, and the torso will lean slightly forward over the thighs. Keep the inner thighs parallel to each other.
► Firm your shoulder blades against the back. Take your tailbone down towards the floor and in towards your pubis to keep the lower back long. Contract the abdominal muscles very tight.
► Stay for 30 seconds to a minute. To come out of this pose straighten your knees with an inhalation, lifting strongly through the arms. Exhale and release your arms to your side.

Double Leg Raise pose

► Lie on your spine with legs together and arms by your side close to the body.
► Inhale and lift both your legs up to a 90-degree angle.
► Exhale and bring the legs down. If you have a weak back then place both