

Will Belly Fat Make You Dumb?

Two weeks ago in my "Health Tips From the Professor" I told how abdominal obesity (otherwise known as "belly fat") increases our risk of dying from both heart disease and cancer. But everyone probably knew that already. This week I'm going to write about a recent study that breaks new ground and should really grab everyone's attention.

This study showed that **abdominal obesity dramatically increases the risk of developing dementia** as we age (RA Whitmer et al, Neurology, 71: 1057-1064, 2008). This study involved 6,583 members of Kaiser Permanente of Northern California, ages 40 to 45, who had their abdominal obesity measured between 1964 and 1973. The investigators then pulled their medical records between 1994 and 2006 when they were between 73 and 87 years old and asked how many of them had dementia.

The results were shocking. The participants were divided into five groups based on their abdominal circumference. **Those with the largest abdominal circumference were nearly 3 times more likely to have developed dementia than those with the smallest abdominal circumference. And that was after the data were adjusted for age, sex, race, education, diabetes, hypertension, hyperlipidemia, stroke and heart disease - all factors that are known to affect the risk of dementia.**

Interestingly enough the abdominal circumference was a better predictor of dementia risk than was BMI, the most frequently used measure of obesity.

Those subjects who had high abdominal obesity and normal BMI had a 2-fold increased risk of developing dementia, while those subjects who were obese but had normal abdominal circumference had only an 80% increased risk of developing dementia.

Of course, those people who were both obese and had a large belly were the worst off - they had almost a 4- fold increased risk of developing dementia.

Now let's get to the question that I'm sure that many are dying to ask me: "If I don't like what I see when I look into the mirror, am I doomed to develop dementia when I get older?"

The answer is no. Most experts feel that the effects of abdominal obesity are reversible. But the time to act is now! If one waits until they get older, they might just forget that they ever read this article.

To Your Health!
Dr. Stephen G Chaney