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Celebrating 90 Years

## Whittle Your Waist

Experts say waist measurement can be an indicator of heart disease risk.

**Amy Landsman**

Special to the Jewish Times

It's certainly not high tech, but a simple tape measure can tell you a lot about your health. That's because women who measure more than 35 inches in the waist, and men who measure more than 40, are at increased risk for what is called cardio metabolic syndrome.

Cardio metabolic syndrome is a catch-all phrase for a variety of conditions, including high blood pressure, abnormal cholesterol and insulin resistance. These conditions put people at very high risk for heart disease.

Cardiologist Shannon Winakur of Midatlantic Cardiology Associates said you may even feel just fine and still be at risk for a cardiac event.

"I tell [patients], especially with high blood pressure and even diabetes, their first symptom might be sudden death," said Dr. Winakur.

Waist measurements are taking on new urgency as researchers find out more

and more about how the fat cells in our midsections impact our overall health.

Those fat cells are "doing more than sitting there and causing your pants to feel tight," explained Dr. Winakur.

Rather, she said, abdominal fat cells are metabolically active, which means they send out signals that have a negative impact on your blood vessels.

What's more, there are two kinds of fat around our bellies: fat just under the skin and visceral fat. Fat under the skin is mainly the fat you can see. While not very fashionable, and certainly not good for us, it's not nearly as serious as visceral fat.

"Visceral fat in particular is rapidly absorbed by the liver," said exercise physiologist Kerry Stewart, a professor of medicine at Johns Hopkins medical school and director of Hopkins Clinical and Research Exercise Physiology.

"Fat in the liver is a particularly harmful place to have a lot of fat" because of its association with

non-alcoholic liver disease and diabetes-related heart disease.

"There's a load of research papers pointing to the harmful effects of central fat," said Dr. Stewart. "Unfortunately, prevention isn't practiced to the degree that it should be."

Keeping abdominal fat down and cardio metabolic syndrome at bay all comes back to our old friends, diet and exercise.

"It's good old-fashioned energy in, energy out," said Baltimore fitness expert Lynne Brick. "You gotta play the game. While 85 or 90 percent of the American population believes exercise is important, less than 20 percent are members of health clubs." She acknowledged that "huge numbers of people walk" for exercise. "But it's not just about walking," she said.

According to Ms. Brick, exercise should include both aerobic and resistance training, which increases the lean muscle mass. Said Ms. Brick: "The more muscle mass you have, the more efficiently you burn calories."

She added: "It's not about what the scale says. It's about what your body composition is. I believe exercise is the best medicine."

Johns Hopkins' Dr. Stewart believes that raising awareness about waist size will help people focus on improving their health.

"If you live a lifestyle that is relatively inactive and you overeat, it's hard to get rid of fat. If you're physically active and have a good healthy diet, the probability of being fat is reduced," he said.

Some people think that fat accumulation is part of the natural aging process. Dr. Stewart disagrees, contending that it's due more to lifestyle habits and/or the choices we make.

"We've shown in our research that when you put people in a six-month exercise program, they will significantly reduce the fat around their waist," he said.

Dr. Stewart also believes physicians should make waist measurements part of their routine exams. When he talks to medical groups, he tells doctors it's just as important to have a tape measure as a stethoscope around their necks.

In fact, Dr. Stewart said, even if you only lose a little, it

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will have a positive impact on your overall health.

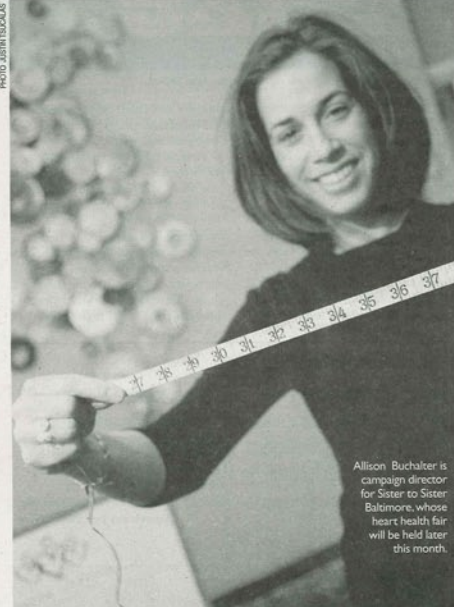
"The scale doesn't necessarily show you the change in body composition," he explained. "If you went on an exercise program you can't see the change in the liver fat, you can't see the change in the internal fat. Some of the benefits of exercise are not that obvious, but they occur. Internally there are also a lot of changes."

Dr. Winakur agreed. "You have to exercise," she said. "If you lose weight, it helps most of the risk factors [of cardio metabolic syndrome]. I am constantly talking to people about it."

The annual Sister to Sister National Women's Heart Health Fair is a free event for women that features lifestyle presentations, cutting-edge medical information, and free heart-health screenings. The fair takes place on Tuesday, Feb. 24 from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Baltimore Convention Center. For information, go the Web site [sistertosister.org](http://sistertosister.org) and click on "campaign cities." □

Amy Landsman is a free-lance writer in Lutherville.

PHOTO: JEFFREY TUCKER



Allison Buchalter is campaign director for Sister to Sister Baltimore, whose heart health fair will be held later this month.

### Quick Health Fact

**80%** of Americans have back pain episodes. Of that figure, 90 percent won't require surgery or long-term treatment. For the other 10 percent, the most likely problem is low-back disk herniation. Back pain costs Americans approximately \$100 billion annually in medical bills, disability and lost productivity.

Source: Johns Hopkins Medicine