

Aging and Body Fat

Clients will often come my way once they notice that their muffin top or love handles are not responding to the usual fitness program. Many are exasperated with the seeming loss of control of body fat levels. There is undoubtedly good reason to be alarmed, but there are some things that can be done to prevent an ever expanding waist line. Of course these are diet and exercise related.

To begin, let's examine dietary habits. One of the most obvious reasons for higher fat body levels is over eating, but food choices can also make a big difference. No one really over eats on vegetables, it's usually the carbohydrate choices that are putting on the pounds. Excess carbs coupled with high fat intake is a double whammy. This, as well as stress, hormone imbalance, excess alcohol intake and use of corticosteroids can create chemical imbalances that encourage fat storage. As you can see, some factors are more easily addressed than others, maintaining a healthy diet is one of the easiest and most effective ways to stave off fat storage.

Secondly, lean muscle mass is another key to maintaining healthy body fat levels. Essentially, if you maintain your lean muscle mass, you have a license to eat because muscle is metabolically active and uses calories to stay alive. Body fat is basically dead weight. Generally what happens is that some muscle loss occurs with age and inactivity, but your actual weight stays the same. The weight lost is muscle and is replaced with metabolically *inactive* fat. So now, you actually 'get fatter' eating the same amount of calories. You will now have to reduce caloric intake to 'maintain' weight and weight loss is nearly impossible.

Regular weight bearing and weight resistance exercise can partially delay or significantly overcome the loss of muscle mass with aging. By age 75, the percentage of body fat typically doubles compared with what it was during young adulthood. The distribution of fat also changes, changing the shape of the torso. A healthy diet and regular exercise can help you keep body fat from increasing too much.

It has long been a bone of contention of mine to look at body fat charts such as this one:

Women: Normal Range by Age

Age	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75-84
Body Fat %	22.5	23.9	25.8	29.1	34.3	35.8

Men: Normal Range by Age

Age	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75-84
Body Fat %	15.2	17.6	19.7	22.2	24.6	26.3

According to this chart, it's 'acceptable' for you to gain body fat as you age but this doesn't have to be the case. With regular exercise and a healthy diet, you should be able to maintain your lean muscle mass which helps keep body fat levels in check. An active and fit 70 year old woman with a body fat level of 23% has a much lower risk of disease and aging than her counterpart with a 'normal' body fat level of 34%. If you are 20 or 70,

having a body fat level of 34% will have similar health risks. Too much body fat at any age can increase the risk of health problems.

So, to sum it up it's the same story; attention to a healthy diet and exercise program will not only help you fight disease and aging, it will keep you fitting in your skinny jeans with less effort and frustration as you age.

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Shawna is shaking up the fitness routines of several people in her Adventure Boot Camps. For more information, please visit her website.

