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September 2019

Are you **skinny fat**?

Some of us stay slim no matter how much we eat or how little we move, but is all as it seems?

You might be one of those naturally slim people but knowing your true weight is not as simple as looking in the mirror or checking the numbers on your scales – you need to understand what your weight is made of.

What is skinny fat?

Your bathroom scales might show your weight as normal but metabolically you could share many of the health characteristics of an overweight or obese person. Looking at how your fat is distributed will give a more accurate picture of your health status.

The lowdown on fat

The fat you can see is called subcutaneous fat, but not all fat is stored under the skin and there's a hidden kind called visceral fat. This is the one to watch out for, because if you're skinny fat you're likely to have plenty of it.

What's so bad about visceral fat?

It's stored around your organs and it's sneaky because while it's easy to see the blubbery type, the visceral kind is on the inside. It can spell trouble for your health, with Harvard Medical School researchers saying visceral fat puts us at high risk of health problems such as:

- Heart disease.
- High cholesterol.
- Type 2 diabetes.
- Lower bone density.
- Reduced cognitive function.

How do you get skinny fat?

Just like with normal fat gain, an unhealthy diet and lack of exercise play a role.

When you lose muscle mass through lack of movement – because you're sitting all day at work, on your commute and at home in the evenings, doing no exercise – your metabolic rate slows. With no change in diet, that unused energy is stored as fat. In the case of a skinny fat person, the fat accumulates on the inside.

Weekend workouts

Working out furiously on the weekend to make up for a sedentary week isn't enough. Prolonged sitting is the problem, so introducing opportunities for movement throughout the day and a short workout or two mid-week will make a big difference.



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10 September is World Suicide Prevention Day.

Every year, suicide is among the top 20 leading causes of death globally for people of all ages. It is responsible for over 800,000 deaths, which equates to one suicide every 40 seconds. For each suicide approximately 135 people suffer intense grief or are otherwise affected. This amounts to 108 million people per year who are profoundly impacted by suicidal behaviour. Visit www.iasp.info/wspd2019/ for more information.



Carbohydrates: 3 myths exposed

Carbohydrates are often seen as bad for you but there are a number of beliefs that aren't exactly true.

1. You must cut carbs to lose weight

This assertion may have sold many diet books but the research doesn't back it up. While it's true that many studies have found low-carb diets to be more effective for weight loss than low-fat diets in the short term, in the longer-term both approaches produce modest weight loss at best.

A 2015 review of the research on different types of diets in the *Lancet* found that low-carb diets outperformed low-fat diets. But the difference in weight loss among the groups of dieters was tiny, with the low-carbers losing about one kilogram more after 12 months.

"I don't think it matters if you cut down fat or refined carbs," says nutritionist Catherine Saxelby. "You need to eat less of everything in order to lose weight. Yet it needs to be done in a way that can be maintained for longer than one week."

2. Low-carb diets are healthier

Carbohydrates come from plants (grains, fruit and vegetables) and if you make the decision to restrict plants in your diet your health is likely to suffer. Many plant foods are rich in the vitamins, minerals, phytochemicals and fibre that we need to stay healthy. But there's a big difference between unrefined and refined plant foods.

A diet high in unrefined wholegrains (wholegrain bread, brown rice, rolled

oats and other grains) protects against cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes, but swap these for refined grains like white flour, white bread, sugar and white rice and your risk of poor health will increase.

Wholegrains and other carbohydrate-rich foods, such as legumes, also encourage a healthy diversity of gut bacteria, something that is linked to reduced inflammation, better immunity and improved mental health. One recent study found that switching to a high-fat, no-carb diet lowered the number of beneficial bacteria residing in the gut.

3. You have to avoid fruit because it contains sugar

"Yes, fruit does contain sugar," says nutritionist Joanna McMillan, "but the vast majority of fruits have a low glycaemic index. This means the sugars are absorbed slowly and steadily." Make fruit your go-to snack and you'll also get essential nutrients, fibre and antioxidants, all wrapped up in a low-kilojoule package.

Where fruit can be a problem, however, is when it's juiced. Drinking fruit as juice makes it easier to ingest more kilojoules and also releases the fruit sugar (fructose) faster into your bloodstream. You also reduce some of the benefits of the fibre by pulverising it so finely, as it changes the physical structure. Some commercial juices even remove the fibre altogether. Stick to whole fruit. ✘

Why a workout works for your brain



“Exercise is the most transformative thing you can do for your brain. A single workout can improve your ability to shift and focus attention.”

Wendy Suzuki, neuroscientist

We know that exercise can help you live longer, reducing your risk of heart disease, stroke and type 2 diabetes. But it looks like it has wider-reaching effects.

“Exercise is the single best thing you can do for your brain in terms of mood, memory and learning,” says John Ratey, a neuropsychiatrist at Harvard Medical School and author of the book *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*. Ratey, and other researchers, have found that fitness can impact a wide range of cognitive abilities.

Exercise reduces stress, anxiety and depression.

One immediate benefit you'll notice when you get moving is stress relief. Exercise is a powerful way to relieve stress because it increases the levels of key neurotransmitters, including serotonin, dopamine and noradrenaline, that can be depleted by anxiety and depression. It's for this reason that exercise is often prescribed to people with low mood and depression.

Every year, says Ratey, researchers are discovering more chemicals that are made in the body when we exercise, chemicals that travel up to the brain and help our brains work better. The result? We feel better and brighter. In fact, Ratey likens a bout of exercise to taking a little bit of Prozac (an antidepressant) with a little bit of Ritalin (an ADD medication), such is its impact on focus, mood and motivation.

Exercise protects memory and thinking and helps us focus.

Are you experiencing more brain fog as you get older and is it affecting your work? Exercise can help by improving your ability to focus and stay on task. Studies on school pupils have found that lessons interspersed with exercise improved attention span and helped with multitasking and holding information.

Experiments in children, adults and the elderly show that a part of the brain called the hippocampus grows as people get fitter. The hippocampus is critical for short- and long-term memory and helps us navigate and think about the future.

It is unique because it is one of only two brain areas where new brain cells continue to be generated throughout our lives, says neuroscientist Wendy Suzuki, who runs a learning, memory and cognition lab at New York University.

Exercise has this effect because it increases levels of a key growth factor in the hippocampus called Brain Derived Neurotrophic Factor (BDNF), explains Suzuki. BDNF has been described as ‘miracle grow for the brain’ and is also considered important for balancing our mood and combating stress. ✕

What type of exercise works best?

Getting up a good sweat works wonders, but so too does getting up from your computer and taking a walk.

Almost all the research on exercise and the brain has looked at walking, following the guidelines of 30 minutes, most days of the week, but strength training is important too. A study from The University of Sydney found resistance training to be particularly effective at boosting cognitive function. As for yoga, it really does appear to help with stress. Yoga can teach you to switch on your body's ‘relaxation response’, with a 2010 study showing that after regular yoga practice brain scans showed shrinkage of the amygdala, a deep brain structure implicated in processing stress, fear and anxiety.

How to talk about **mental health at work**



There's no right or wrong time to bring up your mental illness at work but a little planning will help pave the way.

The embarrassment and fear of being viewed negatively in the workplace can get in the way of getting the help you need. Even though awareness of mental illness has increased we're still living in a world where people can face discrimination because of their illness. When you decide to approach your managers to discuss your illness, it's important you feel safe and supported and this can be achieved by some careful planning.

Getting what you need

Mental health problems like depression and anxiety can create stressful situations in the workplace and make on-the-job challenges harder to handle. They can also stand in the way of achieving work goals, which can create even more job-related stress. Your boss or co-workers are not your therapists but they can provide support for you to continue to do your job well.

Planning the conversation

Planning what you're going to say can help you to structure your ideas and the points you want to cover. You can also practise how the conversation might flow.

- Think about how you will describe your mental health condition. If you feel it's in your best interests to be specific, then do so; otherwise, you can speak in general terms.
- You might want to share some details about your condition, which could include your diagnosis, symptoms, medications, and any specific treatment.
- Think about how much detail you want to share. It's impossible to retract something once it's been said, so only share details you're comfortable with.

Reframe your issue

Focus on the job: If you feel your mental health condition is affecting your productivity or performance, Headspace recommends talking to your employer. Make the conversation easier by solely on the impact it's having on your work will make the conversation easier.

Make it official: You might also consider getting a letter from a health professional to support you and confirm the diagnosis.

Think physical: Thinking of the issue in terms of physical health is one way

to reduce the pressure. How would you approach the conversation if you were telling your boss that you had a physical problem and would need extra help or easier access to your workplace?

Face the facts: Fact sheets can be useful to help your employer understand your condition and make it easier for them to talk about it. You can get more information about anxiety and depression from beyondblue.org.au/resources. ✕

R U OK at work?

A healthy workplace culture needs to allow people to speak up about mental health concerns without shame or fear and to get the support they need. Employers and staff can help by asking and answering a simple question.

While R U OK? Day is an Australian based event, the idea behind reminding everyone that any day is a good day to ask, "Are you ok?" is universal. Go to ruok.org.au for resources to help you start that conversation.

Give your mental health a workout

Research has shown that regular exercise is associated with a lower incidence of depression, thanks to the release of feelgood neurotransmitters, but the social aspect also plays a part. Heading out to the park, the gym, or taking a group workout class gets you out of the house and interacting with others, which can ease isolation, an important factor in mental wellbeing. If you prefer low-intensity exercise like yoga, you'll be happy to learn that it also has mood-boosting benefits and, if it includes meditation, can help reduce anxiety.

Exercise also works to reduce the build-up of stress. Take a brisk walk when you're feeling stressed, and you'll experience deeper breathing and reduced muscle tension, both of which induce a sense of calm. (See page 3 for more on how exercise benefits the brain.)



Back to basics

- ▶ First speaking to a close co-worker or an HR officer you trust can be a good start, says Sane Australia. Their support can be invaluable and you can ask them to consider being in the room with you when you tell your manager.
- ▶ Think about when and where you prefer the meeting to take place. Are you more of a morning person? Do you want to chat over coffee in a cafe or organise a more formal meeting in the office?
- ▶ Think about what you will do if the conversation becomes negative, or you unexpectedly get upset.
- ▶ Prepare prompts or discussion points to keep the conversation on track and make sure you cover everything you want to.
- ▶ Outline what you think would help. For instance, more flexibility with deadlines when you hit a rough patch or days off as required to attend appointments.

Does your workplace temperature affect your work?

You can't always control the temperature in your workplace but could it be affecting your productivity?

Many factors can affect workplace productivity and performance, and temperature is a significant one. In many places, excessive heat can mean it's hard to stay cool, and working in hot conditions can cause discomfort and reduce job satisfaction.

Hot stuff

If you work in a building, chances are you enjoy the comfort of airconditioning but on a hot day it can be hard to keep the temperature at a comfortable level even with a cooling system. If we're too hot we can experience fatigue, reduced mental performance and decreased motor skills. We're also more likely to lose patience with our coworkers, which can place a strain on workplace relationships. During hot weather, it's important that:



- There is adequate ventilation and fans (but above 27°C fans are ineffective at cooling the air, so some form of cooling is needed).
- Reflective film or blinds on windows is used to cut down heat gain. And moving desks and workstations away from windows will also help.
- You have access to plenty of water to stay hydrated.
- You have access to portable air-cooling cabinets, if airconditioning is not available.
- Airconditioning is properly maintained to avoid malfunction in the middle of a heatwave.
- You can opt for a more casual dress code during hot weather, for example, where ties and jackets can be removed and shorts or looser clothing can be worn. ✕

Hot stuff

If you have a job that takes you outdoors, you're at risk of heat-related illness during the warmer months. This happens when your body has to work too hard to keep cool or starts to overheat. During hot weather, it's important that certain jobs are cancelled or rescheduled to cooler parts of the day or until the heat eases off. Keeping hydrated while working in hot weather is vital. ✕



Ask an expert about ...

Q When I sit for extended periods my hips tighten, what can I do?

A You've likely heard the mantra that 'sitting is the new smoking' and that it's bad for our general health and wellbeing... and our hip flexors don't like it one bit. The problem is that for many of us it's inevitable that we spend several hours a day sitting and our hip flexor muscles can become tight and inflexible. Lower back pain, knee problems and incorrect pelvic alignment are all associated with tight hip flexors. It's when these areas start to protest that we realise we have a problem.

If your job and lifestyle mean you're sitting for long periods, it's a good idea to make an appointment with a physiotherapist to address the issue before it becomes harder to treat. In the meantime, you can try:

- Setting a timer to help you remember to stand up from your desk every hour and walk around the office will reduce tightness and pain in the hips.
- Regular stretching is the best way to prevent pain and release tight muscles.

Signing up to a Pilates or yoga class twice a week will help keep your back and hip flexor muscles supple.

- Your physiotherapist may recommend a foam roller or spiky ball to stretch out tight muscles. A good time to use them is while you watch television.

Use the internet to find a physiotherapist near you or ask your doctor for a recommendation. ✕

App of the month

Rise & Recharge

We spend on average nine hours sitting every day. Sitting for long periods increases your risk of developing heart disease, type 2 diabetes and some forms of cancer,

but regular short bursts of movement can help counteract this. Developed by the Baker Institute, the Rise & Recharge app helps you become more chair-aware and move regularly.

Available free from the App Store and Google Play. ✕

2 hours a week outside, say doctors

Spending time outdoors, especially in green spaces, is so good for you that some doctors have taken to prescribing it for their patients. It can potentially lower your stress levels, decrease blood pressure and boost mental health and life expectancy. But is there a recommended dose? According to a paper published in the journal *Scientific Reports*, the answer is about 120 minutes each week. Spending just 60 or 90 minutes in nature did not have as significant an effect, while five hours a week offered no additional health benefits.

Not everyone has the benefit of living near green spaces that they can visit every day. But the researchers found that you can get the same benefits by taking a long walk on one day, or making a trip to a recreational area on a weekend. ✕



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News Bites



Protein shakes may affect long-term health

There's no shortage of products with added protein, promising to bulk up muscle or help you lose weight. Far less attention is given to the potential negative side-effects of long-term, high protein intake or from consuming certain types of amino acids (the building blocks of protein).

Research published in *Nature Metabolism* led by researchers from The University of Sydney's Charles Perkins Centre, suggests that while delivering muscle-building benefits, excessive consumption of branched-chain amino acids (BCAAs) found in many protein supplements may reduce lifespan, negatively impact mood and lead to weight gain. Whey protein – the most popular form of fitness protein – is made from dairy by-products and contains high levels of BCAAs.

“What this new research has shown is that amino acid balance is important – it's best to vary sources of protein to ensure you're getting the best amino acid balance,” says researcher Dr Samantha Solon-Biet.

Protein sources other than dairy include meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans, lentils, legumes, nuts and seeds. ✕

What's your diet's carbon footprint?

Reducing your consumption of meat and dairy may reduce your environmental impact, but what is the difference between beef and chicken? Is an apple more environmentally friendly than an orange? Should you drink more tea or stick to coffee?

A calculator has been developed to help you discover the climate impact of what you eat and drink. All figures are based on a global average.

You can visit the calculator here:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-46459714>

1 THING YOU CAN DO TODAY

Ditch your **bottled water**...for good

The world loves its bottled water. Bottled water is the fastest-growing drinks market in the world, one that's estimated to reach US\$215 billion by 2025.

We tend to see bottled water as healthier, more convenient and tastier than tap water. The reality is that, if where you live has water that is safe to drink from the tap, we might be better off filling up our water bottles from the tap.

You'll save money

Tap water is much cheaper than bottled water. For example, in the US it's about 2000x cheaper to buy a gallon of tap water than it is to buy a gallon of bottled water. But not only will you save money by drinking tap water, you may also be getting a healthier product.

In many countries, tap water is subject to stringent testing and regulations to ensure it's safe to drink. Bottled water is not subject to the same controls, which means quality can vary depending on the brand. As can pH levels, or acidity. Some bottled water brands are too acidic to pass stringent tap water tests.

Do you buy spring water because of the minerals? Testing has shown tap water has a relatively high concentration of beneficial minerals like calcium and magnesium, more than most bottled brands.

You'll help the planet

The ABC's *War on Waste* in 2018 highlighted the impact of single-use plastics, with more than 666,000 tonnes of plastic waste produced by Australian households every year. According to Planet Ark, single-use plastics such as bags, water bottles, straws and food packaging are significant contributors to plastics in oceans and waterways. They also contribute to landfill, and the vast majority are made from petroleum, a non-renewable resource.

Tip: Local water authorities should be able to tell you if the water in your area is safe to drink. You can then investigate options for your home such as water filters and purifiers. ✕

EAT SMARTER

Add **barley** to your menu

Much of the barley in the world goes to making beer, but thanks to chefs such as Yotam Ottolenghi it's becoming more fashionable to eat at home. Here's why:

1. Barley is exceptionally nutritious. A 'super' grain without a big price tag, barley contains good amounts of B-group vitamins, vitamin E, iron, zinc, magnesium, calcium, phosphorus and selenium. This means that barley is good for your heart, skin and bones, and can help lower inflammation.

2. Barley contains different types of fibre. Insoluble fibre (what is also sometimes called roughage) will help keep you 'regular', while soluble fibre can help lower cholesterol and blood sugar. Barley is high in resistant starch, a type of fibre that research shows may help protect against the genetic damage that precedes bowel cancer, the third most common cancer in the world.

3. It's easy to cook. The most popular form of barley is pearled, easily available from the supermarket. You can cook this up in 30 minutes and use it as the basis for a salad or risotto, add it to soups and stews or use it for porridge. You can also buy barley flakes for muesli or granola or to add to muffins. ✕



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