But diet, exercise in midlife can help

Having a tubby belly in midlife can increase the risk of developing dementia decades later, a new study says.

About half of Americans have excess fat that accumulates around the waist, says Rachel Whitmer, a researcher at Kaiser Permanente Division of Research in Oakland. Past research had suggested that belly fat increases the risk of developing diseases like diabetes, stroke and heart disease, she says.

This is the first research to suggest that a fat tummy also ramps up the risk of dementia -- including Alzheimer's, an incurable brain disease that will affect about 10 million baby boomers, according to the Alzheimer's Association.

But middle-aged people still have time to reduce their risk, Whitmer says. "Belly fat goes away with diet and exercise," she says. "That's the good news from this study."

Whitmer and her colleagues studied 6,583 men and women ages 40 to 45 who lived in Northern California and attended a Kaiser health clinic for checkups that included a measure of abdominal fat. The team noted each time a patient in the study was diagnosed with dementia, a general term for severe memory loss.

The team found that people who were obese -- 30 pounds or more over a healthy weight -- and had collected a lot of belly fat in their 40s were 3.6 times more likely to develop dementia during the 30- to 40-year study. But even people who'd kept close tabs on overall body weight were at risk if they sported a spare tire: They were 1.8 times more likely to develop dementia compared with people who were lean all over. The study appears in today's online edition of Neurology.

"It's not just about weight," Whitmer says. "It's about where you carry your weight." Many people seem predisposed to carry fat in the tummy, a so-called apple shape. She says people with that kind of body may be at risk.

Fat cells in the abdomen secrete a stew of substances, including hormones that seem to play a role in a number of diseases such as heart disease and now dementia, says Richard Stein, a spokesman for the American Heart Association.

Deposits in the brain that lead to Alzheimer's seem to accumulate decades before the symptoms surface, Whitmer points out. But that delay might represent an opportunity for middle-aged Americans to adopt lifestyle changes such as a low-fat diet, Stein says.
Although many people view a large belly as an unavoidable fact of life, just a few changes in diet can go a long way toward reducing body fat.

"You can beat this," Stein says.

TEXT OF INFO BOX BEGINS HERE

The shape you're in

Look in a mirror or use a measuring tape to figure out if your belly puts you at risk for health problems such as heart disease -- and even dementia. Your risk goes up with a waist measurement of:

Men

More than 40 inches

Women

More than 35 inches

Source: National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute

(c) USA TODAY, 2008