

# HEALTH REPORT

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## STOMACH SIZE MAY BE AN INDICATOR OF DEMENTIA OCCURRING IN LATER LIFE

Researchers hoping to find a means to predict if a person will suffer dementia in their later years have concentrated their efforts on the central region of the body. Growing evidence is pointing to the stomach as an early indicator of mental clarity problems that may not develop for another 30 years or more.

According to a study recently published in the *American Academy of Neurology*, people in their 40s with larger stomachs are at a much greater risk for suffering from dementia when they reach their 70s than are persons of similar age who have flatter bellies.

There have been some previous studies that correlated stomach size in the elderly to dementia. However, the results of these investigations have been questioned since many older people lose muscle mass and strength in their upper body. This leaves the elderly with more mass in their midriff and the belly seems to be expanded. Taking a look at much younger people and correlating their physical health to later dementia seemed a better way to gather data.

With this in mind, researchers studied 6,583 people living in Northern California who had measured abdominal density figures from between the ages of 40 to 45. Their bellies had been measured with a caliper to determine their amount of body fat and belly density. Now, an average of 36 years later, 16 percent of these people was diagnosed with dementia.

What the study found was that overweight people with large bellies were 2.3 times more likely than those with a normal belly size to develop dementia. Additionally, people who were considered to be obese and had a large belly were 3.6 times more likely to develop dementia. Being overweight alone did not seem to be as much of a contributing factor, as persons who were overweight but did not have large bellies only had an 80 percent increase in dementia over those with flatter stomachs.

“Considering that 50 percent of adults in this country have abdominal obesity, this is a disturbing finding,” said study author Rachel Whitmer, Ph.D., a research scientist at Kaiser Permanent Division of Research in Oakland, Calif. “It is well-known that being overweight in midlife and beyond increases risk factors for disease. However, where one carries the weight, especially in midlife, appears to be an important predictor for dementia risk.”

It was most interesting to note that having a large abdomen increased the risk of dementia regardless of whether participants were of normal weight, were overweight or were obese. It was noted in the study that non-whites, smokers, people with high blood pressure, high cholesterol or diabetes and those with less than a high school education were more likely to have abdominal obesity.

While more research is definitely needed into the contributing factors that lead to dementia, the results of this study certainly give a person in their middle years a further clue to how their current lifestyle may affect their future. Results of this study point to one more good reason to practice reduced food intake along with a regimen of exercise aimed at reducing abdominal fat. Now it's not just about things like heart health or vanity. A flatter belly can help contribute to future mental health and retained memory.