

# Seven Steps to a Strong, Healthy Waistline

By Richard J. Wolff, RD, LDN

Thousands of articles are written every year describing how to build the perfect waistline. Yet, waistlines continue to grow! According to the National Centers for Disease Control, over 68% of Americans are overweight or obese. A large, unfit waistline is not only uncomfortable, it increases your risk for cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer and chronic, low back problems. Fortunately, building a strong healthy waistline is possible. By following the seven steps in this article, you will be on your way to getting the waistline you want!

**Step 1:** Check Your Numbers. Despite our preoccupation with small waistlines, few Americans actually know their waist measurement. Knowing your waist measurement is important because it's directly related to your health. Excess fat in the midsection (internal fat) is metabolically unhealthy. Unlike subcutaneous fat (the fat between muscle and skin), internal fat secretes chemicals into your blood stream. These chemicals (called cytokines) can increase your risk of degenerative diseases such as heart disease, cancer and diabetes.

In an attempt to help Americans trim their waistlines, health agencies are now setting guidelines. According to the National Institutes of Health, men should strive to maintain a waist of 40 inches or less, while women should strive for 35 inches or less. Keeping your waistline at or below these cut points can significantly reduce your risk of chronic disease. To check your numbers, wrap a tape measure around your waist at the navel (belly button).

**Step 2:** Build a Strong Base. Strong abdominal and low back muscles improve posture and muscle tone in your waistline. Good posture and muscle tone are important ingredients of a healthy waistline. Increasing the strength of your abdominal wall and low back can be accomplished with a simple, strength-building program. Some people mistakenly believe more is better when it comes to exercising their waistline. If more were better,

everyone who engaged in this practice would be walking around with strong, healthy waistlines – but this just isn't happening.

The muscles in your waistline are physiologically identical to the muscles in the rest of your body (legs, chest, back, etc.). Therefore, improving the strength and tone of your waistline can be accomplished with the same brief, intense workouts that work for the rest of your body.

**Step 3:** No Zero Days. In *The Seven Truths of Fitness*, I wrote about the benefits of No Zero Days (daily physical activity). In addition to protecting your health, daily physical activity can also trim your waistline. Research from the National Weight Control Registry and Health Management Resources (HMR) has linked burning at least 300 calories every day to successful weight management (losing weight and keeping it off).

In addition to burning calories, physical activity also functions as a gateway behavior. It does this by improving decision making. In other words, physically active people are more likely to make other good decisions (such as healthy eating). Combining the calorie-burning effect of daily physical activity with the calorie-cutting effect of healthy eating creates synergy that can take inches off your waistline.

**Step 4:** Fill up on fewer calories. When most Americans try to lose body fat, they make the fatal mistake of trying to eat less. Eating less of a low-volume diet only leaves you hungry. The easiest way to cut calories and lose body fat is to actually “fill up” on foods containing 5 to 50 calories per ounce. Not surprisingly, the average American diet is full of foods containing 75 to 200 calories per ounce. By increasing your consumption of 5 to 50-calorie-per-ounce foods, you automatically get full on fewer calories.

Some examples of foods that fit into this category are: white fish, shellfish, poultry, veggie burgers, low-fat dairy, water-based soups, all fruits and vegetables (including corn, potatoes, sweet potatoes, peas, butternut squash, bananas, grapes, etc.), and meal replacements (such as shakes and entrées).

Fruits and vegetables are even more effective at reducing calories and body fat when combined with meal replacements. Over 70 published references and studies have shown that using meal replacements significantly improves weight loss. Blending whole fruit into a meal replacement shake or adding

whole vegetables to a meal replacement entrée are simple ways to add volume and nutrition while keeping calories low.

**Step 5: Beat the Menopausal Myth.** For many women the transition through menopause can lead to weight gain in the waist. However, it's a myth that weight gain is inevitable. A study published in the *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* confirms that healthy living can prevent the menopausal spread <sup>1</sup>.

In the study, researchers from the University of Pittsburgh found that women who consumed a reduced-calorie diet while being physically active (burning about 200 calories per day) were able to prevent weight gain. According to Margery Gass, M.D., Executive Director of the North American Menopause Society, "We are moving toward greater obesity in the general population, so we all have to eat less and exercise more. Don't blame it all on menopause."

**Step 6: Avoid Targeting Your Waistline.** Despite the notion you should focus on your waistline, waistline exercises won't help you slim down. Exercise does not have a site-specific (spot-reducing) effect when it comes to fat loss. Performing crunches, side bends and other abdominal exercises will not reduce the size or number of fat cells around your waist.

What does help is burning more total calories (Step 3) and filling up on fewer calories (Step 4). Save your time and money when it comes to the latest abdominal devices being sold on infomercials. The only way to truly "shrink" your waistline is to follow steps 3 and 4.

**Step 7: Strengthen Your Entire Body.** Behind the epidemic of growing waistlines in the United States is another epidemic that gets little attention: the weakening of Americans. Starting in our 40s, we lose about ½ pound of muscle per year, and gain at least that much in fat. Losing muscle and gaining body fat contributes to both poor health and a growing waistline.

Muscle loss leads to weakness and inactivity – a trend that only contributes to growing waistlines. When you lose muscle, you also burn fewer calories making it easier to gain body fat. The best way to reverse this trend is to strengthen your entire body. According to Miriam Nelson, Ph.D., author of *Strong Women Stay Slim*, "All women benefit from increased strength. Women over age 40 benefit even more, because strength training reverses age-related muscle and bone loss."<sup>2</sup>

To get the most out of your strength workout, target the major muscles of your body and strive to reach deep muscle fatigue. Lifting heavy weights to produce deep muscle fatigue is the only way to build strength. In his book, *Living Longer Stronger*, Dr. Ellington Darden writes about deep muscle fatigue by stating, “The involved muscles should be barely able to lift the weight.”<sup>3</sup> Reaching this level of fatigue by the last repetition of an exercise guarantees maximum benefits!

## **Get Some Help**

Get some help reaching your goals by contacting the experts at MEDFITNESS. To experience our trademarked, personal training program, schedule a *Free Trial Workout* by calling (630) 762-1784 or visiting us online at [www.medfitnessprogram.com](http://www.medfitnessprogram.com).

## **About the Author**

Richard J. Wolff, RD, LDN is the president of MEDFITNESS. He is the author of *Fitness Wisdom* and has written for the *United States Weightlifting Federation*. His articles have been featured in *Personal Fitness Professional* and *Nautilus, America's Fitness Magazine*. Richard has worked with the American Cancer Society and the Discovery Health Channel.

## References

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