



DO  
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**WOMEN?**

*The Science Behind  
Weight Loss and Gender.*

by Colleen Travers

Men have certain biological advantages that make it easier to shed weight faster.



**R**ight before I had my son, my husband bravely went where, probably, not too many men go—at least when it comes to a very pregnant wife. He bought me a Peloton bike. Knowing that I love to exercise, he took a chance that instead of flying into a hormonal fit of rage I'd be grateful to exercise without having to leave the house or disturb a napping baby to make it to a class. And he was right. I raved about my cycling workouts so much that he decided to jump on the bike too. But what happened on that bike for him was very different from what was happening for me. Sure, I was getting a dose of endorphins and slowly coming back to my prebaby weight; but after only a month of hopping onto the saddle, he was noticeably smaller, needing new pants and having a carousel of coworkers comment on how great he looked. I was happy for him, of course, but I also couldn't help but wonder why he seemed to be losing weight faster and more easily than I was.

## The Science Behind Gender and Weight Loss

A recent study published in *Diabetes, Obesity and Metabolism* looked into the connection between weight loss and gender, and the findings confirmed what was happening in my house: During an eight-week period in which 2,000 adults followed a low-calorie diet, men lost 26 pounds on average, compared to 22 pounds on average for women. In addition, the men lowered their body fat and decreased their risk for diabetes and heart disease. This is largely, in part, because men have more muscle mass than women, says John La Puma, M.D., F.A.C.P., a board-certified internist and clinical director and founder of Chef Clinic, based in Santa Barbara, California.

## Where We Carry Fat

How we carry fat is not quite as simple as claiming men have more belly fat and women have excess weight in their thighs and butt. "Fat distribution is regulated by sex steroids, but very little is understood about the mechanisms by which they modulate growth...and the size of specific fat deposits in humans," says Wendy Scinta, M.D. "Genetic factors account for up to 70 percent of BMI variance, which is influenced by sex." During puberty, boys gain weight from mostly muscle; for girls, it's mostly fat. After puberty, women are more likely to have excess fat in the butt area. But as men and women get older, the factors that cause these accumulation differences resolve.

"In addition to muscle burning more calories at rest, the muscles are also where insulin receptors are, meaning that blood sugar is often metabolized more quickly in men than in women," La Puma adds. The receptors allow insulin in the blood to bind with these muscle cells, which then creates glucose that the body can use for energy. Because men have more muscle mass, they have more insulin receptors attached to these muscle cells, giving them an advantage with their metabolism. This means that men typically burn 500 to 1,000 more calories during an average day than women, says Wendy Scinta, M.D., M.S., president of the Obesity Medicine Association and a board-certified bariatric

physician based in Fayetteville, New York. "That equates to one to two more pounds of weight loss than women per week, if both are eating the same number of calories. Not fair—but true," she says.

Here's what else you need to know about gender and weight loss, so you and your partner can both lose weight and improve health.

## Genes Determine Where You Lose Body Fat

Your genetic predisposition plays a significant role in how fat is carried on the body, so while it may seem like men shed abdominal fat first, there's no real difference as to where on the body men and women will lose weight initially, says Scinta.

In addition to having less muscle mass and, therefore, a slower starting metabolism, women have another hurdle when it comes to weight loss: hormones. "In premenopausal women [especially during PMS, one to two weeks before a woman's period starts], fatigue, bloating and carb or sweet cravings can be very difficult to control," Scinta says. "During menopause, women can have sleep disturbances (which by themselves leads to weight gain) as well as depression and anxiety." These depression symptoms tend to drive women toward sweets and carbs, which cause the brain to release serotonin, a chemical that makes you feel good. Postmenopause, women are dealing with significantly decreased testosterone levels, which leads to a drop in muscle mass and in metabolic rate, Scinta says. It's important for women to adjust their caloric intake during these hormonal shifts, particularly postmenopause, to prevent weight gain.

Because men typically have less of an emotional attachment to food and eating, they respond to more innate hunger signals as

the driving force of their weight gain, adds Scinta. "Since most men carry their fat centrally, they have more weight-related conditions or diseases—one of which is insulin resistance that leads to metabolic syndrome and affects satiety. I find that if hunger is controlled, men will lose weight relatively fast," she says. With women, the relationship with food can be more complicated, says La Puma. They may need to learn how to separate hunger from feeling lonely, bored or happy or other common reasons that cause people to overeat.

## Both Genders Need to Work at Maintenance

"Maintaining weight loss has nothing to do with gender," says Scinta. "Men will always be able to eat more calories than women in maintenance,

**RAMP UP EXERCISE ONCE YOU'RE AT YOUR GOAL WEIGHT TO MAINTAIN THAT LOSS.**

because they are starting with higher metabolic rates—but the key to maintaining weight loss is combating the metabolic adaptations of decreased metabolism [due to losing fat and muscle mass] and increased hunger," she says. This means making it a point to exercise or move for 60 to 90 minutes a day, in addition to addressing any

behaviors behind unhealthy eating habits. Incorporating high-intensity interval training (HIIT) can help maintain weight loss, suggests La Puma. "This can be either resistance or cardio, but the intervals make the difference because they will help the muscles that hold insulin receptors burn calories when you are not exercising," he says. The research supports him: A study presented at the American College of Cardiology's 68th Annual Scientific Session found that those who did HIIT exercises consisting of a minimum of four intervals of one minute of high-intensity exercise followed by a few minutes rest lost more body fat, gained more lean muscle and trimmed inches off their waist than those who did a consistent moderate-intensity workout, such as walking or cycling.

