Late Night Snacking – A Love/Hate Relationship

It is quiet in the house except for the drone of the TV. Dinner has been served, the kitchen clean, even dessert has been eaten. But for some reason a late night craving is calling you back to the kitchen. Sound familiar? In our house it is a regular occurrence. So what’s so bad about rummaging the refrigerator or cupboards for that satisfying late night crave of salt, sweet or the dreadful CARBOHYDRATES?? The answer is BELLY FAT. The unwanted belly fat soon becomes apparent especially in women as we get older. So much so that the late night snacking becomes a love- hate relationship.

**What is Belly Fat?**

Belly fat is the description of what happened to our once flat and toned stomach that is now sitting on your lap. It is the overflowing of excess skin at our pants waistband as we are struggling to zip up in the morning. It is the “inch” of roll that we grab and mutter to ourselves “when did that get there?”

On a more technical note, unfortunately as we become older usually beginning in our 40’s, our metabolic rate decreases thus muscle mass diminishes and fat becomes a greater percentage of our weight. The decrease in muscle mass combined with the decrease in metabolic weight makes the maintenance of our “weight” difficult. Abdominal fat can also be linked to a decreasing level of estrogen in women as they approach menopause. The problem with belly fat, besides the fact that it tends to appear suddenly and not go away, is that it is not only subcutaneous, but visceral as well. Visceral means that the fat tends to lie deep adjacent and sometimes within our organs. This is the hate part of the relationship. An increase in visceral fat can pose many unforgiving health consequences. For instance an excessive amount of visceral fat produces hormones and other nasty substances that can raise blood pressure, alter cholesterol levels (and not the good way) as well as alter the body’s ability to use insulin properly. The resulting health issues are cardiovascular disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, breast cancer and colorectal cancer.

So how is that late night bowl of ice cream sounding now?

**Losing the Belly Fat**

How do we get rid of that nasty visceral belly fat? You can do abdominal exercises until you turn blue in the face, but the belly fat will still be hanging over your belt-line. Visceral fat responds to the same diet and exercise strategies that can help you shed excess pounds and lower your total body fat. To fight back and to win the battle of the bulge, try these tips:

1. **Eat a healthy diet.**  This is the love part of the relationship. Instead of satisfying our late night craving or any daytime craving for that matter, keep it real and unprocessed. Eat plant-based foods, such as fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Choose lean sources of protein like Quinoa, chicken and fish. Limit saturated fats, like cheese and butter and choose moderate amounts of monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats found in fish and nuts.
2. **Monitor portion size and drink lots of water.**  Keep an eye on your portion size as healthy calories add up too. Consider eating half of a meal, sharing meals in restaurants, and eating several small meals or snacks a day.  By drinking 8 or more glasses of water not only keeps you hydrated, but also keeps you from consuming too many calories.
3. **Exercise.** TheDepartment of Health and Human Services recommends moderate aerobic activity, such as brisk walking, for at least 150 minutes a week or vigorous aerobic activity, such as jogging, for at least 75 minutes a week. In addition, strength training exercises are recommended at least twice- three times a week.
4. **Get plenty of sleep -** You should be getting between 7-9 hours of sleep per night. Not enough rest negatively affects your appetite control system, making you crave more sugars and starches. In addition, cortisol increases, which is notorious for mobilizing fat to the abdominal area.

So when you are sitting on the couch watching TV and your late night crave begins, remember the more than an “inch” that you can pinch. Choose the right late night snack and make it a win-win relationship.