Stress Makes You Fat

If you don't keep your stress levels in check, it may be tougher to stay slim.

That's the takeaway from a study published Thursday in the journal *Obesity*, which suggests chronically elevated levels of the stress hormone cortisol can increase the risk of being overweight or obese.

7 FOODS ALL SKINNY GIRLS HAVE IN THEIR KITCHEN

Researchers tracked about 2,500 men and women ages 54 and older for four years, periodically taking hair samples to analyze their cortisol levels. Previous studies have linked spiked cortisol levels to weight gain, but samples involved blood, saliva and urine, which are less reliable than hair because they can change day to day. Study authors also recorded participants' weight, body mass index (BMI), and waist circumference.

Although the authors said their findings are limited due to the restrictive older population, all of who were white men and women, they noted that there was a clear association among elevated cortisol and a larger waistline, heavier weight, and higher BMI — a scale to measure body fat based on weight in relation to height.

THE MOST DANGEROUS AREAS FOR BODY FAT

"People who had higher hair cortisol levels also tended to have larger waist measurements, which is important because carrying excess fat around the abdomen is a risk factor for heart disease, diabetes, and premature death," lead study author Dr. Sarah Jackson, an epidemiology and public health professor at University College London, said in a news release.

While genetics, diet and lifestyle can have an impact on our weight, if you want to achieve your dream body — and simply reduce your risk to the aforementioned diseases — regulating your stress levels is key, the research suggests.

The American Psychological Association offers the following tips to better manage your stress:
1. **Exercise**, as the practice can have physical *and* mental benefits, several studies suggest
2. **Take a break** from the thing that's stressing you out, and prioritize self-care
3. **Spend time with friends and family**, or simply call or email a loved one to express your concerns
4. **Meditate** because research suggests being mindful can alleviate emotions that may be causing physical stress
5. **Crack a smile and laugh**, as those actions can relieve pent-up tension

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