

NEW Healthy Eating & Diet

10 Flat Belly Tips

Stomach feeling fat? Here's how you can de-bloat to look and feel better.

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WebMD Feature

You'd love to have a flat belly for the party tonight, but thanks to one too many sodas or that basket of tortilla chips, zipping your pants is a real struggle. Abdominal bloating not only looks bad, but can cause physical discomfort. The good news? Experts say stomach bloating is a condition you can avoid pretty easily.

We're not talking about extra pounds of stomach fat here, but the temporary abdominal distention that plagues most everyone from time to time. Unless your stomach bloating is because of a medical condition, such as liver or heart disease, the only real cause is intestinal gas – not "water weight," says Michael Jensen, MD, an endocrinologist and obesity researcher at Mayo Clinic.

"It is a myth that bloating in the stomach is from fluid accumulation in healthy adults, because the abdomen is not a place where fluids accumulate first," Jensen says. "Instead, you would see it in your feet or ankles as long as you are upright."

So what causes gas to accumulate and wreak havoc on how you feel and look? Experts say there are several causes, from food intolerances to constipation.

Flat Belly Tip No. 1: Avoid Constipation.

Too little fiber, fluids, and physical activity can lead to constipation, which can result in bloating, Jensen says.

To avoid this, eat a diet high in fiber (25 daily grams for women and 38 for men) from whole grains, fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts, and seeds. Also, drink plenty of fluids (aim for 6-8 glasses a day) and aim for physical activity for at least 30 minutes, five times a week.

If you're eating a low-fiber diet, gradually bump up the fiber level, making sure you also drink plenty of fluids for better tolerance.

Flat Belly Tip No. 2: Rule Out Wheat Allergies or Lactose Intolerance.

Food allergies and intolerances can cause gas and bloating, but these need to be confirmed by your doctor. Many people self-diagnose these conditions and unnecessarily eliminate healthy dairy and whole grains from their diets. If you suspect you have an allergy or intolerance, see your doctor for tests.

You may benefit from reducing the amount of the suspected food and/or eating it with other foods. In the case of dairy, it can help to choose aged cheeses and yogurts, which are lower in lactose.

Flat Belly Tip No. 3: Don't Eat Too Fast.

Eating quickly and not chewing your food well can cause air swallowing that leads to bloating, says Dawn Jackson Blatner, RD, a spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association.

So slow down and enjoy your food. Your meals should last at least 30 minutes. Also, keep in mind that digestion begins in the mouth, and you can decrease bloating just by chewing your food more, Blatner says.

There's another benefit to slowing things down: When you take your time to thoroughly chew and taste your food, your snack or meal becomes more satisfying. And studies have shown that if you eat more slowly, you may end up eating less.

Flat Belly Tip No. 4: Don't Overdo Carbonated Drinks.

The fizz in carbonated drinks (even diet ones) can cause gas to get trapped in your belly, Blatner says.

Instead, drink water flavored with lemon, lime, or cucumber. Or just reduce the number of fizzy drinks you consume each day. Try some peppermint tea for a soothing beverage that may help reduce bloat.

Flat Belly Tip No. 5: Don't Overdo Chewing Gum.

Chewing gum can also lead to swallowing air, which can cause bloating.

If you've got a gum habit, alternate chewing gum with sucking on a piece of hard candy or eating a healthy, high-fiber snack like fruit, vegetables, or lower-fat popcorn.

Flat Belly Tip No. 6: Watch Out for Sugar-Free Foods.

"Many of my patients suffer from bloating because they consume too much sugar alcohol in artificially sweetened foods and drinks," which can lead to bloating, Blatner says.

Experts recommend consuming no more than 2-3 servings per day of artificially sweetened foods and drinks.

Flat Belly Tip No. 7: Limit Sodium.

Highly processed foods tend to be high in sodium and low in fiber, both of which can contribute to that bloated feeling, Jensen says.

Get in the habit of reading food labels, Blatner advises. When buying processed, canned, or frozen foods, shoot for no more than 500 mg of sodium per serving in any product -- or a total of 2,300 mg of sodium per day.

Flat Belly Tip No. 8: Go Slow with Beans and Gassy Vegetables.

If you're not used to eating beans, they can cause that gassy feeling. So can the cruciferous family of vegetables, such as broccoli, Brussels sprouts, and cauliflower.

That doesn't mean you should give up on these super-nutritious, high-fiber vegetables.

"Don't be nervous about beans," Blatner says. "Just work them into your diet slowly until your body adjusts to the compounds that can initially cause gas."

Or, you can take an enzyme product like "Beano," which can help reduce gas from beans or vegetables.

Flat Belly Tip No. 9: Eat Smaller Meals More Often

Instead of three big meals per day, try eating smaller meals more often. This can keep you free of the bloated feeling that often follows large meals (think Thanksgiving). Eating more frequently can also help control blood sugar and manage hunger.

So go for five to six small meals each day, but make sure the quantity of food and calories are proportionate to your needs. To create a daily meal plan that includes the recommended amounts of all major nutrients, visit the U.S. Department of Agriculture's "mypyramid" web site.

Flat Belly Tip No. 10: Try Anti-Bloating Foods and Drinks.

A few studies suggest that peppermint tea, ginger, pineapple, parsley, and yogurts containing probiotics ("good" bacteria) may help reduce bloating.

"These are safe foods that are good for you when used appropriately, so why not try them and see if they help you de-bloat?" says Blatner, author of *The Flexitarian Diet*.

A Final Word About Stomach Fat

Experts agree that laxatives, water pills, fasting, and skipping meals are not recommended, either to help you de-bloat or lose weight.

If you're looking to flatten your belly for the long term, there's no substitute for losing a few pounds, Jensen says.

"For most everyone, when you lose total body fat, your body reduces belly fat preferentially," he says. "Even though people lose weight differently, there is a little more lost in the abdominal region than elsewhere."

Experts also say that doing ab exercises all day long won't get rid of the excess belly. Although you can't necessarily spot reduce, you *can* strengthen abdominal muscles with routines like Pilates and exercise ball workouts. And, stronger muscles can help your belly appear flatter.

"Toning and strengthening the abdominal muscles can help you look less fat [and] improve your appearance, muscle tone, and posture, which is also very good for your back," Jensen says.

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Reviewed on March 04, 2009

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One serving of french fries is equal to?

- a. 10 fries
- b. 20 fries
- c. 30 fries



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