



A Little Wiser

Why do men develop beer bellies?

A beer belly is more common among men than women. Why is that?

'The distribution of body fat is different in men than in women,' says Edith Feskens, professor of Global Nutrition. The soft blubbery fat on women's buttocks, hips or abdomens is subcutaneous fat. Men, on the other hand, store fat deeper in the body, around the organs, and this is known as visceral fat. 'The difference is related to the sex hormones oestrogen and testosterone,' says Feskens. 'Women have a lot of oestrogen. From puberty onwards they not only store more fat than men, but it also ends up in other places. The subcutaneous fat, especially on the thighs and buttocks, provides a store of energy that a woman draws on during pregnancy and breastfeeding.'

So the more testosterone in your system, the greater the risk of a beer gut? It's not quite as simple as that, says Feskens. 'Testosterone makes for more muscle formation and less abdominal fat in men. As they get older, testosterone levels drop and men often go bald and develop a belly.'

In women it's the other way round: the more testosterone, the higher the risk of a beer belly. Feskens: 'During the menopause, oestrogen levels drop drastically, and testosterone becomes more dominant. As a result, the body develops a male fat pattern. That's why women have an increased risk of diabetes and cardiovascular disease after the menopause.'

There's a role for genetics as well. 'Your genes partly determine whether you store the fat under the skin or in the abdominal cavity. It is not always visible. You can have a very modest belly and still have a lot of fat around the organs.' So a beer belly is mainly a matter of too many calories.

But does it have anything to do with beer? It does a bit, according to Feskens. 'Beer contains a lot of calories. According to the Netherlands Nutrition Centre, one beer contains about the same calories as a croquette. A study that we carried out a few years ago also showed that confirmed beer drinkers have a less healthy lifestyle than wine drinkers, for example. You often drink beer in larger quantities than other alcoholic drinks. And of course, alcohol makes you feel like snacking. Besides, in the Netherlands we usually drink alcohol in the evening, when your body uses up less energy'. TL

'Beer drinkers have a less healthy lifestyle than wine drinkers'

Edith Feskens, professor of Global Nutrition

Every day we are bombarded with masses of sometimes contradictory information on pressing issues. In this feature, a WUR scientist gives you something to hold on to. What are the facts of the matter?

Every question makes you a little wiser. Do you dare to ask yours? Email us at redactie@resource.nl

Illustration Marly Hendricks

