

Where You Carry Your Fat Is Linked to How Fast Your Brain Ages

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Where your body stores fat, not just how much you carry, is linked to how fast your brain appears to age — a difference that weight and BMI alone can miss
- › In a large observational study of UK Biobank adults, visceral fat, the deep fat around your organs, showed the strongest association with damage to the brain's white matter, the wiring that connects nerve cells
- › Researchers suggest visceral fat's inflammatory activity may be the pathway to these brain changes, though the study was observational and cannot establish that fat causes them
- › Animal research points to a brain protein called K63 that builds up faster in obese rats, hinting that obesity and aging may affect memory through a shared mechanism
- › Because visceral fat responds to lifestyle, steps like strength training, tracking your waist-to-hip ratio, avoiding seed oils, and getting quality protein may help you support your metabolic and brain health

You can weigh the same as the person next to you, share the same body mass index (BMI), and still be carrying a very different risk to your brain. What seems to matter is not only how much fat you carry, but where your body stores it.

For years, the conversation around body fat has centered on the number on the scale. Newer research points somewhere more specific: the fat packed deep in your abdomen, around your organs, appears to behave differently from the fat that sits just under your skin (subcutaneous fat). This deep fat, called visceral fat, is metabolically active in ways that may reach far beyond your waistline and into how you think, learn, and remember as you age.

That connection matters because your brain's aging is not fixed the way your age or your genes are. Where you carry fat is something you can influence, which makes it worth understanding what the science is actually finding and what it means for you.

Visceral Fat Showed the Strongest Link to Damage in the Brain's Wiring

An observational study led by researchers at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University provides new insight on how visceral fat is linked to faster brain aging. Published in the journal *Nature Mental Health*,¹ it systematically maps where fat sits on the body against detailed brain scans and cognitive scores, and is the first large-scale study of its kind, the researchers note.²

The team drew on the UK Biobank, a long-running research database of adults in the United Kingdom, and analyzed data from more than 18,000 participants whose average age was in the early 60s. They used a body-composition scan called dual-energy X-ray absorptiometry (DXA), a low-dose imaging method that measures how fat is distributed, to separate fat in the arms, legs, and trunk from visceral fat. Brain health was assessed through multiple types of MRI scans plus a battery of thinking and memory tests.

- **Where you store fat traced different paths in the brain** — One of the study's central messages is that two people can weigh the same and share the same BMI while carrying very different risks to the brain. Fat in different regions of the body was

associated with distinct patterns of change across separate brain systems — networks tied to movement, emotion, memory, and other functions — and these patterns were not visible from body weight or BMI alone.

Fat in different parts of the body maps out entirely different trajectories of change in the brain, the researchers note. Among all the fat depots the team examined, visceral fat stood apart as the one most consistently tied to trouble.

- **Visceral fat showed the strongest association with abnormalities in the brain's white matter** — This is the wiring that carries signals between nerve cells. Specifically, higher visceral fat was linked to signs of reduced nerve-fiber density and tissue disorganization in white-matter tracts, while fat in the arms, trunk, and legs was linked to more preserved white-matter structure.

White-matter damage is closely connected to the biology behind small vessel disease and vascular cognitive impairment, conditions that sit upstream of dementia risk.

- **The study did not directly test what causes this link, but the researchers offered a plausible explanation** — Visceral fat secretes pro-inflammatory signaling molecules, including tumor necrosis factor-alpha and interleukin-6.

The team suggests this may trigger low-grade, body-wide inflammation that spills over into the brain and contributes to white-matter damage — whereas fat in the arms, trunk, and legs releases lower levels of these inflammatory factors. This is presented as a hypothesized mechanism, not a proven chain of events.

- **The brain changes are connected to thinking and memory** — To link these brain changes to mental performance, the researchers built models that estimate a "brain age gap" (BAG) — the difference between how old a brain looks on a scan and the person's actual age, where a larger gap points to faster-appearing aging.

They found that the brain age gaps from cortical systems (the sensorimotor, limbic, and default mode networks) statistically accounted for part of the relationship between visceral fat and performance on tests of reasoning, executive function, processing speed, and memory. Of all the fat measures studied, visceral fat exerted the most pronounced effect on these outcomes.

Because the study is cross-sectional (a snapshot in time rather than a group followed for years), it cannot establish that visceral fat causes brain changes; it can only show that the two are associated.

The researchers also note that the DXA scan cannot perfectly separate deep visceral fat from the fat just under the skin within the trunk, and that the participants were relatively similar in ethnicity, lifestyle, and socioeconomic background, so the results may not carry over to more diverse populations. The measured effects were modest in size.

Taken together, the study points to visceral fat as a distinct and measurable risk marker for brain aging, though the authors are clear that longer-term and interventional research is needed before firm conclusions can be drawn.

A Single Brain Protein May Connect Obesity to Faster Memory Aging in Rats

While the featured Hong Kong study looked at where fat sits in the human body, a separate line of research from Virginia Tech asks a different question: What actually happens inside the brain to link excess body fat with earlier memory decline? Scientists have long known that obesity is associated with a higher risk of dementia and Alzheimer's disease, but how that risk takes shape inside the brain has remained unclear.

Led by neuroscientist Dr. Timothy Jarome, a professor at Virginia Tech, the research team is examining whether obesity may accelerate the brain's aging process and contribute to earlier memory decline, and whether obesity and normal aging affect memory through the same underlying mechanism.³

- **The protein at the center of the findings** — The researchers are focusing on a molecular process called K63 polyubiquitination, a kind of chemical tagging inside cells that helps regulate how memories form during learning. In earlier work, the researchers found that K63 activity rises as memory declines: In younger brains, K63 levels drop during learning to help memories form, but in older brains those levels stay too high instead of adjusting normally.

"When you had too much of this protein, we'll call it K63, that you had poorer memory. And what we're actually finding is that with obesity, we're actually seeing an accumulation of this protein," Jarome explained.⁴

- **What changed in the obese animals** — When the team studied young rats fed a high-fat diet, the animals showed elevated K63 levels comparable to those normally seen in much older rats, and they performed worse on memory tests. The researchers found that the protein accumulated more rapidly in the obese animals than in those undergoing normal aging, appearing at an earlier point in life than it otherwise would.

"What surprised us was we were seeing the same changes in young obese rats that we normally see in much older brains — just on a much faster time scale," Jarome said. This suggested that obesity-induced memory loss and age-related memory loss may be connected through this same pathway.

- **The early gene-editing results** — In prior research, the team lowered K63 levels using a targeted gene-editing technique and improved memory in older rats. They are now applying that approach to obese animals. Jarome reported that in the old brain the method was able to reduce the protein's levels and restore memory, and the team hopes the same may occur in the obese brain.

"If we can understand the mechanism that connects these two things, then we can start thinking about ways to target it," Jarome said. "My hope is that this will help us better understand what's causing the brain to essentially

*age faster and make us more likely to have dementia and Alzheimer's disease."*⁵

**These findings are from laboratory or animal research and may not directly apply to human health.*

A Neurologist Breaks Down How Deep Belly Fat May Affect the Brain

In a widely shared post on X,⁶ Dr. Sudhir Kumar, a neurologist at Apollo Hospitals in Hyderabad, India, summarized the growing research on visceral fat and brain health. His central point is that the subcutaneous fat is different from visceral fat, and that it is visceral fat that is particularly harmful.^{7,8}

- **What higher visceral fat was linked to** — Kumar notes aside from cognitive decline and a higher risk of dementia, people with higher visceral fat also have a reduced hippocampal volume (the hippocampus is the brain's memory center). He adds that this association becomes even more pronounced after accounting for a person's age and overall body weight, which is part of why he considers it worth attention.
- **The changes may start well before symptoms appear** — He emphasizes that the effects on the brain may begin years before dementia becomes obvious. Studies have linked higher visceral fat with smaller overall brain volume, reduced executive function, slower information processing, poorer attention, and lower performance on memory tasks — subtle shifts that may develop gradually.
- **Kumar attributes the brain effects to several overlapping biological changes rather than a single cause** — He points to chronic low-grade inflammation that can gradually damage brain cells over time, along with insulin resistance (reduced sensitivity to the hormone that manages blood sugar), high blood pressure, unhealthy blood lipids or cholesterol, and damage to the body's smallest blood vessels, all of which can reduce healthy blood flow to the brain.

He adds that hormonal changes tied to visceral fat may further interfere with normal brain function. In his framing, visceral fat actively releases inflammatory chemicals and hormones that can disrupt processes throughout the body. These are described as biologically plausible pathways drawn from existing research, not as proven cause-and-effect in any individual.

- **He frames visceral fat as modifiable** — Unlike age or genes, visceral fat can often be reduced through healthy lifestyle changes, such as consuming a healthy diet, regular exercise, consuming adequate protein and fiber, getting adequate sleep, and maintaining a healthy body weight.
- **Measure the waist, and be skeptical of shortcuts** — Kumar cautions readers not to judge their health by the scale alone. He recommends tracking waist circumference and the waist-to-height ratio, suggesting a ratio below 0.5 as a useful target for most adults, because these often reflect visceral fat better than body weight.

He also states plainly that no "fat-burning" supplement has convincing evidence behind it. And he notes that for people already living with diabetes, prediabetes, hypertension, or fatty liver disease, reducing visceral fat may carry added importance for both heart and brain health — saying that what's good for the waist is good for the brain.

Grip Strength and Fat Location Tracked Dementia Risk Better Than Total Body Fat

An earlier 2024 study published in the journal *Neurology* adds an important detail to this finding: It suggests muscle may matter alongside fat, and that the pattern of fat across the body may signal risk more clearly than overall body fat does. Conducted by scientists from Sichuan University in China, the retrospective analysis examined how body composition relates to neurodegenerative diseases.⁹

The researchers analyzed nine years' worth of data from 412,691 people enrolled in the UK Biobank, with an average age of 56 at the start. Over that period, 8,224 participants went on to develop dementia, including Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases. The primary message from the team is that grip strength and the locations of subcutaneous fat did a better job of predicting neurodegenerative disease and biological signs of brain aging than more general measures of muscle and overall body fat.¹⁰

- **A stronger grip was associated with lower risk** — Participants who maintained relatively high muscle strength, measured by their grip, across the study were 26% less likely to develop a neurodegenerative condition. The researchers framed this as a sign that muscle quality may carry more weight than sheer muscle quantity, and that grip strength here serves as a simple, practical stand-in for overall muscle health.
- **Where fat sat, not just how much, was associated with risk** — The analysis found that people with a higher measure of arm fat compared with leg fat were 18% more likely to receive a diagnosis for a neurodegenerative condition.

The authors are explicit that this does not mean arm fat causes these conditions; it is an association. Instead, they describe fat distribution as at least a signal of underlying health problems that may worsen brain aging — noting, for example, that many of the patients who developed a neurodegenerative condition had a history of heart disease and stroke, both of which have been directly linked to excess fat.

- **Belly fat showed a measurable gap in disease rates** — Trunk fat was another factor associated with increased risk. Among men with high levels of fat around the trunk, the disease rate was 3.38 cases per 1,000 person-years (a way of counting that combines how many people were studied with how long each was followed), compared with 1.83 cases among men with low belly-fat levels.

Among women, the rate was 2.55 per 1,000 person-years for those with high abdominal fat, compared with 1.39 for those with low amounts. The team notes that targeted efforts to reduce trunk and arm fat while promoting healthy muscle

development may be more useful for protection than general weight control — a suggestion about direction for future work rather than a proven strategy.

- **The proposed biological explanation** — The researchers offer a tentative mechanism while stressing it is not settled. Subcutaneous fat, they explain, can be a sign that the body also has fatty deposits in visceral organs, including within the muscles, which may increase inflammation and impair how those tissues function.

That dysfunction can damage the inner lining of blood vessels — the researchers suspect the same blood-vessel-lining dysfunction may also be involved in neurodegeneration. As they put it, "the underlying mechanisms linking body composition and neurodegeneration have not been fully investigated."¹¹

The authors place their work against a large backdrop, framing their results as a step toward identifying modifiable risk factors rather than a finished answer. "These neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's affect over 60 million people worldwide, and that number is expected to grow as the population ages, so it's crucial that we identify ways to modify risk factors to develop some preventive tools," Sichuan University epidemiologist Dr. Huan Song, one of the researchers, said.¹²

Simple Steps to Help Protect Your Brain from Visceral Fat

The research on visceral fat and brain aging is still developing, and none of it points to a single quick fix. What it does suggest is that this deep fat surrounding your organs is one of the more modifiable factors you can influence, and that your day-to-day habits around movement, food, and muscle are where that influence lives. Below are practical, general approaches for keeping visceral fat in check and supporting your overall metabolic and brain health:

1. **Build and maintain muscle mass through regular strength training** — Greater muscle mass is associated with better cognitive resilience and supports insulin sensitivity and overall metabolic health, which is part of why muscle keeps coming

up in this research. Aim to work resistance training into your routine, and pair it with daily walks and regular movement throughout your day rather than long uninterrupted stretches of sitting.

- 2. Track your waist-to-hip ratio instead of relying on weight or BMI alone** – This simple measurement gives a clearer picture of visceral fat than the scale does. To find yours, divide your waist measurement by your hip measurement, then check it against the general norms below and watch how it shifts as you adjust your habits.

Waist-to-hip ratio	Men	Women
Ideal	0.8	0.7
Low risk	<0.95	<0.8
Moderate risk	0.96 to 0.99	0.81 to 0.84
High risk	>1.0	>0.85

- 3. Favor saturated fats from grass fed animal sources and cut processed seed oils** – Seed oils turn up in most processed and restaurant foods and are high in linoleic acid (LA), a fat that may contribute to visceral fat accumulation over time. Cooking with stable alternatives such as tallow, grass fed butter, and ghee is a straightforward way to lower your intake, and reading labels on packaged foods helps you spot the seed oils to leave behind.
- 4. Get enough quality protein, with about a third from collagen** – Adequate protein supports muscle maintenance and helps supply the building blocks your body relies on, and getting enough is also linked with keeping visceral fat in check.

A practical target for most adults is around 0.6 to 0.8 grams of protein per pound of ideal body weight, drawing from sources such as ruminant meats, eggs, and low-fat seafood, with roughly one-third coming from collagen-rich sources to round out the amino acids your body uses.

5. Pay attention to your metabolic health, not just your weight — Because insulin resistance and blood-sugar problems repeatedly surface in the discussion of visceral fat and the brain, it can help to keep an eye on the markers that reflect how your metabolism is doing. Tests such as fasting insulin, HOMA-IR, and HbA1c can offer a window into your blood-sugar and insulin health over time.

Talk to your healthcare provider about whether this testing is appropriate for you, and use the results to guide the lifestyle adjustments above rather than chasing the number on the scale alone.

Frequently Asked Questions About Visceral Fat and Brain Aging

Q: What is visceral fat, and how is it different from regular body fat?

A: Visceral fat is the deep fat that surrounds the organs inside your abdomen, and it differs from subcutaneous fat, the fat stored just under your skin. Researchers describe visceral fat as metabolically active, meaning it is chemically busy in ways that may affect the rest of the body. In the research covered here, it is the type of fat most consistently tied to concerns about brain health.

Q: Does carrying visceral fat cause dementia?

A: No study covered here shows that. The featured research is observational, meaning it can identify associations but cannot prove that visceral fat causes brain changes or dementia. What the research suggests is that higher visceral fat is linked to signs of faster brain aging and to markers tied to cognitive decline, which is different from establishing cause and effect.

Q: Why might where I carry fat matter more than my weight or BMI?

A: In a large study of UK Biobank adults, fat in different regions of the body was associated with distinct patterns of change across separate brain systems, and those patterns were not visible from body weight or BMI alone. In other words, body composition can differ meaningfully between two people who share the same weight. This is why some researchers look at fat distribution rather than weight by itself.

Q: How can I tell whether I'm carrying too much visceral fat?

A: The research discussed points to measurements beyond the scale. One neurologist recommends tracking waist circumference and the waist-to-height ratio, suggesting a ratio below 0.5 as a useful general target for most adults. Some approaches also use the waist-to-hip ratio, which you calculate by dividing your waist measurement by your hip measurement.

Q: Can visceral fat be reduced?

A: Visceral fat can be modifiable through lifestyle, unlike age or genes. General approaches associated with lower visceral fat include regular movement and strength training, attention to the quality of the fats and protein in your diet, adequate sleep, and maintaining a healthy body weight. The reporting also notes there is no convincing evidence for any "fat-burning" supplement that specifically targets visceral fat.

This article is for informational purposes only and does not constitute medical advice. Consult a qualified healthcare provider before making changes to your health regimen.

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