

Is Your Workout Giving You Muffin Top?



It's counterintuitive, but your exercise regimen could be sabotaging your fitness goals.

If you have a cortisol problem, your workouts may very well be acting like Miracle-Gro for belly fat. This type of fat, known clinically as "central adiposity," puts us at risk for diabetes and heart disease, and it is one of the first outward signs of hormone imbalance.

Though we exercise to stay healthy, we also want to feel good in our skin, so when we notice a little extra weight around the middle, it's natural to want to amp things up — run longer, lift more, squeeze in another class, even skip recovery days.

This was the case for Sue, an active woman in her late-40s who sought my help primarily for low energy and gaining what she called a "poochy" belly over the past year. Despite cross-training workouts three to four times a week and trail running on off days to relieve stress, she continued to gain weight through her belly and feel bloated after meals.

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WHEN MORE EXERCISE DOESN'T TONE YOUR TUMMY, IT CAN BE AN INDICATOR THAT CORTISOL, YOUR BODY'S MAIN STRESS-ADAPTING HORMONE, AND ITS JITTERY PARTNER, ADRENALINE, ARE OFF BALANCE.

Headquartered in your adrenal glands, this dynamic duo balance each other perfectly and jump into action at the first sign of stress. Adrenalin gives you a brief, intense "fireball" of energy. Shortly after, a longer-lasting downpour of cortisol dampens the surge of adrenalin and softens the effects of stress.

This process is perfectly suited for occasional challenges of daily life. However, problems begin when your body is under *persistent* stress.

Things like overfull days, constant worry, major life changes, running on fumes, and even overly intense exercise can ramp up your adrenalin like a room full of squirrels on a sugar high, making it harder and harder for cortisol to do its job.

You don't even have to feel stressed for your adrenal glands to be overworked. If eventually they sputter and have very little cortisol left to give, the effects are hard to ignore.

Digestion becomes sluggish (bloating and constipation), thyroid and metabolism are suppressed, and your body shifts into energy-storage mode, which translates to fat storage and the unfortunately named muffin top.

Overly intense workouts on top of that can contribute to:

- joint and tendon inflammation, and delayed healing.
- dwindling muscle tone and poor strength gains despite lifting.

- connective tissue weakness and autoimmune conditions over time.
- collagen and elastin breakdown (premature wrinkling).

The problem? Most people don't know they have a cortisol issue. So when they notice extra belly fat, they or their qualified, well-intentioned trainers attempt to blast it away with harder workouts, which leads to a vicious cycle of spiking adrenalin and cortisol with every workout. And here's something important: You can't out-exercise a cortisol problem.

So how do you know if your cortisol is depleted? Some hallmarks in athletes, are:

- foot/ankle swelling for no obvious reason.
- feeling OK during a workout, but feeling exhausted or wanting a nap shortly after.
- light sensitivity or needing sunglasses more often.
- lack of results consistent with training.

When cortisol is depleted, you don't need more exercise, you need a smarter plan. If working out harder won't help, what *can* you do to banish excess belly fat?

First, get to the root of the problem. Confirm if cortisol is involved and if other metabolic hormones such as thyroid, are affected. This is where specific hormone testing and knowing *functional* ranges is critical.

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Back to Sue: Given her concerns, we did a full exam including labs, and uncovered several hormone imbalances, including cortisol and insulin. This told me where we needed to start. Her trainer

was relieved to know the reason for Sue's lack of results despite all her hard work. Along with specific herbal and nutritional support, a crucial part of Sue's care plan to rebuild her hormone health was right-sizing her workouts — to help her stay fit without sending her into a cortisol spiral.

Like many women I see, Sue was understandably skeptical about not working out hard enough. She also knew things weren't improving *despite* all her hard work. She could see and feel the worsening effects of cortisol on her body and ultimately knew she needed to start taking care of things on a different level.

It's important to note that the same plan that causes muscle gain and boosts metabolism in a healthy person can turn on fat-storage hormones and inflammation in someone with a cortisol or thyroid problem. Hormone balance is nuanced and individual, so workouts should be, too.

Sue was a trooper, following through with nutrition and lifestyle changes specific to her unique needs. We agreed at the onset that there was no such thing as perfect, but with persistence, her cortisol began to normalize and she began to feel *good* again. Within a few months, her energy returned, digestion improved, and the extra belly fat fell away (she called our office from a fitting room one day to report "no more muffin top!").

Even better: She began to feel like a stronger, sharper version of herself. In Sue's case, exercise wasn't causing her belly fat. Hormone imbalances were, but the wrong type of workout for her situation tipped the scales.

If this sounds familiar, and you're concerned that your cortisol may be out of whack, seek out a functional medicine professional to help you to reset and rebuild your hormone health.

When your cortisol rebuilds, you'll know it. You'll have more energy, get more from your workouts, and post-exercise recovery will be a piece of cake.



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