Harvard researchers have discovered one more reason to watch our waistlines: avoiding gallstone surgery. Their study, published in the journal *Gut* (Feb. 14, 2006), found that women who accumulate weight around the middle are more likely to need cholecystectomy—surgery to remove the gallbladder. The research suggests that waist measurement may be a better predictor of gallbladder risk than body mass index (BMI).

Gallstones often produce no symptoms and require no treatment. But they can cause severe pain, jaundice, and inflammation of the gallbladder, bile duct, and pancreas. As a result, 800,000 cholecystectomies are performed each year in the United States. Compared to men, women are twice as likely to have gallstones, and the risk increases with age. The *Gut* study analyzed 14 years of data from 42,312 participants in the Nurses’ Health Study. At the outset, none had gallbladder disease; by the end of the study period, the group had undergone 3,197 gallbladder surgeries.

The researchers used two measures of abdominal fat: waist circumference (see sidebar, “Where is the waist?”) and waist-to-hip ratio (waist circumference in inches divided by hip circumference in inches). They found that women with waistlines of 36 inches or more were twice as likely to require gallbladder surgery as those whose waist measurements were under 26 inches. Likewise, women with waist-to-hip ratios of 0.86 or over were 39% more likely to have the surgery than those with ratios under 0.70.

The researchers noted that abdominal fat has a greater impact on metabolism than fat found elsewhere. It may work indirectly to boost the level of cholesterol in bile, which can crystallize into gallstones. (Roughly 80% of all gallstones are made of cholesterol.) Abdominal fat is already associated with heart disease and metabolic syndrome, a constellation of factors that increases the risk for diabetes, stroke, and heart disease. And it’s long been observed that a person’s heart health is likely to be better if she’s shaped more like a “pear” than an “apple”—that is, her body fat accumulates around the hips rather than at the waist.

Compared with BMI, waist measurement may be a better predictor of health problems associated with abdominal fat. BMI is a calculation of body mass based on weight and height. It tends to correlate with the amount of body fat—but not necessarily with body fat distribution.

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**Unconscious mind can help with complex decisions**

“...Well, let me sleep on it...” You’ve probably heard this before and said it yourself. The idea is that when you’re having a hard time making an important decision, it may help to step back and let your unconscious mind take a crack at it. Accepted wisdom also suggests the opposite—that we’re likely to make a better decision only after careful and conscious deliberation. Psychologists at the University of Amsterdam explored the issue in a series of consumer-choice experiments described in the Feb. 17, 2006, issue of *Science*. Their findings indicate that conscious thought may be best for simple decisions. But when things get more complex, two minds—conscious and unconscious—could be better than one.

The experiments involved hypothetical and actual consumer purchases. In one, a laboratory exercise, subjects were asked to choose among several cars based on various negative and positive attributes for each. Half the participants were told to think about these attributes for four minutes before choosing the best functioning vehicle. The others were distracted (they were asked to work on puzzles—a way of occupying their conscious minds) before deciding. When the group considered only four attributes, the conscious deliberators picked the best car more times than the distracted puzzle-solvers. But when the task involved 12 attributes, the distracted group made better choices.

The researchers found similar results when they studied...
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