Why Your Belly Fat Won't Move With High Cortisol (Fix It Like This) Transcript

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Cortisol, HIIT, and the Main Question

So what's up with So what's up with cortisol? Is it cortisol? Is it causing you to gain causing you to gain weight, especially belly fat? And does he tell belly fat? And does he tell you not to you not to do do do high-intensity high-intensity high-intensity exercise? I will exercise? I will answer this answer this question here. I'm 62, and question here. I'm 62, and here's the thing.

With 42 years of experience, With 42 years of experience, I can say that I I can say that I have seen from have seen from real clients how real clients how things happen differently and uniquely.

Why Cortisol Depends on the Whole Person

So, here's the short So, here's the short answer. There is no answer. There is no clear ban clear ban on HIIT just because on HIIT just because it increases it increases cortisol. There is no cortisol. There is no ban on ban on intense strength intense strength training because training because it increases it increases cortisol. There is no cortisol. There is no ban on endurance training because endurance training because it it it increases cortisol.

increases cortisol. Everything depends Everything depends solely on you. My solely on you. My goal at the end of goal at the end of this video is for you to this video is for you to learn how to independently learn how to independently measure and measure and evaluate whether what evaluate whether what you're doing is working. Here's you're doing is working. Here's what we need to do: what we need to do: continue to piece together the continue to piece together the puzzle of knowledge about puzzle of knowledge about exercise physiology, exercise physiology, menopause, and menopause, and aging, because aging, because the body of available the body of available information is not yet information is not yet that vast. And that vast. And even if there is, even if there is, you won't be included in you won't be included in every HIIT every HIIT or strength training study, and or strength training study, and you'll you'll you'll change from year to change from year to year. Maybe you're year.

How Exercise Raises and Uses Cortisol

Maybe you're in perimenopause now, in perimenopause now, then you'll go into then you'll go into postmenopause, then you'll postmenopause, then you'll be in be in postmenopause with postmenopause with great sleep, then you'll be in insomnia. All of these insomnia. All of these factors factors factors will change how will change how will change how effective certain effective certain exercises are for you exercises are for you because they because they change change change your cortisol levels.

So, first of all, So, first of all, cortisol is not the enemy. Cortisol is a friend, and Cortisol is a friend, and while it is definitely a while it is definitely a stress hormone, we stress hormone, we also know it as an also know it as an energy hormone. When energy hormone. When you and I decide to go you and I decide to go to work out, to work out, the body needs the body needs something to fuel the something to fuel the muscles. We store muscles. We store glycogen inside our glycogen inside our muscles. So, muscles. So, carbohydrates usually carbohydrates usually help us help us store store store glycogen in our muscles, and glycogen in our muscles, and this glycogen this glycogen is mobilized when is mobilized when we start we start warming up, start warming up, start exercising, and exercising, and need an need an energy boost. Your cortisol energy boost. Your cortisol is rising. And when is rising. And when cortisol cortisol cortisol goes up, goes up, blood sugar goes up, because we're, because we're releasing glycogen releasing glycogen from our muscles, and now it's from our muscles, and now it's going into our bloodstream going into our bloodstream and acting as fuel, just like and acting as fuel, just like your car your car gets fuel. It gets fuel. It needs him. Now we have it needs him. Now we have it. So, you. So, you can train can train effectively and effectively and efficiently efficiently efficiently while doing the work while doing the work you have planned.

you have planned. Maybe it's just a Maybe it's just a game of pickleball. If you game of pickleball. If you are going

to spend are going to spend an hour or two on the court an hour or two on the court, as many of, as many of you say, because it is you say, because it is so interesting that it is so interesting that it is impossible to impossible to impossible to tear yourself away, your tear yourself away, your body needs body needs glycogen, which should be glycogen, which should be constantly replenished. And if you're playing an. And if you're playing an intense match, you intense match, you need it even need it even more. Even if more.

Stress, Hormones, and Midlife Changes

Even if you take a break you take a break to eat something you to eat something you brought with brought with you, your you, your body still body still needs that needs that cortisol release. This is useful. We want this to. We want this to happen. But this is where the problem lies. We also problem lies. We also get cortisol from get cortisol from other sources: through other sources: through arguments, arguments, arguments, traffic jams, work, traffic jams, work, finances, worry, finances, worry, and anxiety. Some of and anxiety. Some of us are more prone us are more prone to worrying and to worrying and ruminating about things ruminating about things we have no we have no control over than others.

But all of this adds to But all of this adds to our stress levels, our stress levels, and we can't and we can't separate: separate: separate: exercise is good and exercise is good and beneficial, and everything else is a separate stressor.

It doesn't work that way. Your It doesn't work that way. Your body perceives body perceives all this as if it were carrying it all this as if it were carrying it in a backpack. And he doesn't in a backpack. And he doesn't see any difference between them see any difference between them. So you. So you only have a certain amount of only have a certain amount of strength to strength to handle handle handle stress. When we stress. When we go through go through hormonal changes, hormonal changes, usually in our late usually in our late 30s or early 40s, 30s or early 40s, and and and this decline begins—a roller coaster ride of declining of declining estrogen levels—we have estrogen levels—we have less support less support to control to control cortisol levels. We no longer cortisol levels. We no longer have such a have such a large buffer large buffer against stress.

against stress. And remember, it And remember, it comes from all comes from all sources. If you sources. If you think about think about your own middle age, your own middle age, pay attention to what is pay attention to what is happening. We are happening. We are reaching a reaching a reaching a career peak or career peak or perhaps entering an perhaps entering an “empty “empty “empty nest” period at home. It brings about nest” period at home. It brings about change, it can be change, it can be exciting and fun, exciting and fun, but excitement and but excitement and fun are also fun are also stressful. Your body stressful. Your body doesn't distinguish between eustress doesn't distinguish between eustress and distress, the positive, joyful type of stress, joyful type of stress and the "oh no, this is and the "oh no, this is bad" type. Your body bad" type. Your body prepares for both prepares for both a wedding and a a wedding and a funeral with the same funeral with the same stress response.

When Endurance Training Becomes Too Much

Therefore, your activity level Therefore, your activity level in middle age will in middle age will likely likely likely need to change. Maybe you loved endurance exercise and endurance exercise and felt great doing it in your felt great doing it in your 30s, 40s, or 30s, 40s, or even early even early 50s, and then suddenly 50s, and then suddenly found you found you couldn't couldn't couldn't do it anymore. Of course, do it anymore. Of course, this won't happen to this won't happen to everyone, and that's the point. We cannot. We cannot say for sure that you will have a that you will have a negative negative negative cortisol response to cortisol response to endurance exercise. But endurance exercise. But I can say that with endurance exercises this endurance exercises this happens more often.

Some previous Some previous research suggests research suggests that for women that for women in particular, exercise in particular, exercise lasting more than 45–60 lasting more than 45–60 minutes at a moderate minutes at a moderate intensity level —the key point— tends to tends to raise raise raise cortisol levels, so they cortisol levels, so they don't drop to don't drop to normal levels.

Most exercises Most exercises work that way. We play work that way. We play sports, sports, sports, get rid of get rid of get rid of adrenaline, some adrenaline, some anxiety, and anxiety, and feel feel feel better afterwards. That is, cortisol better afterwards. That is, cortisol rises during rises during exercise, as it should exercise, as it should, and then, and then decreases. If we decreases. If we overdo it—and that overdo it—and that means “ overdoing it” overdoing it” individually for individually for everyone— everyone— there is no one-size-fits-all approach, but there is no one-size-fits-all approach, but research shows that after about 45–60 minutes, there is an increased 45–60 minutes, there is an increased likelihood that likelihood that cortisol levels cortisol levels will continue to rise and, therefore, will not and, therefore, will not decline decline decline appropriately over time. This can be appropriately over time. This can be stressful, stressful, stressful, but here's the best way but here's the best way to check it out.

Belly Fat, Insulin, and Cortisol Spikes

to check it out. Focus on your Focus on your results. If you results. If you train longer, train longer, more often, more often, more intensely—just a little bit more intensely—just a little bit, do you know, do you know anyone who anyone who does that? We often does that? We often do this when we do this when we want to lose weight. We want to lose weight. We want to do this want to do this as soon as possible. I as soon as possible. I want to get the want to get the result yesterday.

result yesterday. What about you? We What about you? We tend to increase tend to increase everything at once, even though everything at once, even though our body our body doesn't have enough doesn't have enough resources to resources to keep up. We didn't keep up. We didn't give ourselves rest or give ourselves rest or sleep, we didn't give ourselves time sleep, we didn't give ourselves time between workouts, we between workouts, we may not have given ourselves may not have given ourselves carbs or protein carbs or protein to fuel those to fuel those workouts. So your workouts. So your body experiences body experiences more stress due to more stress due to increased demands, and increased demands, and life continues to go on as life continues to go on as usual. You usual. You still feel the stress still feel the stress of work, kids of work, kids at home, loved ones, at home, loved ones, finances, and all the changes finances, and all the changes that occur in that occur in midlife are still midlife are still happening at the happening at the same time.

same time. You may notice that You may notice that instead of instead of getting slimmer or getting slimmer or fitter, you are fitter, you are actually actually actually accumulating more accumulating more belly fat exactly belly fat exactly where you want it where you want it. Or not. Exactly where. Or not. Exactly where you don't want to you don't want to see it. This was a see it. This was a proviso according to Freud. What I proviso according to Freud. What I want you to want you to understand is that you understand is that you need to monitor your need to monitor your own reactions and own reactions and responses to changes in responses to changes in exercise and other exercise and other stressors.

stressors. Some of you may Some of you may say, "I'm doing what I've say, "I'm doing what I've always done, but always done, but it's not working." To such it's not working." To such people, I would say that people, I would say that perhaps there is something perhaps there is something going on that going on that you don't see. Maybe you don't see. Maybe nothing else has nothing else has changed in your exercise, changed in your exercise, diet, or even diet, or even your sleep. But what you don't your sleep. But what you don't see is that see is that your your your hormone levels may have simply hormone levels may have simply reached a certain point reached a certain point where the protective effects of where the protective effects of estrogen, estrogen, estrogen, testosterone, and testosterone, and progesterone are no longer progesterone are no longer sufficient. So, sufficient. So, your cortisol levels your cortisol levels increase accordingly increase accordingly when estrogen drops.

This means that your cortisol your cortisol responds to any stressor by increasing. When there is When there is too much cortisol, there too much cortisol, there is usually a need is usually a need to control to control blood sugar levels.

blood sugar levels. Cortisol increases, Cortisol increases, remember, it remember, it releases glycogen, releases glycogen, but it can also but it can also release sugar into the release sugar into the blood in other ways. And blood in other ways. And this increase this increase will trigger a release of will trigger a release of insulin, which insulin, which puts you into fat storage mode. So fat storage mode. So fat accumulation usually fat accumulation usually

occurs in the occurs in the waist area. When waist area. When we are in the middle of life, this may not have happened before. You this may not have happened before.

Walking, Recovery, and Smarter Training

You may have previously may have previously stored fat on your stored fat on your thighs or in other thighs or in other places where you didn't places where you didn't notice it, but now notice it, but now your figure is probably changing from an hourglass hourglass hourglass to an apple. These are to an apple. These are signs that you signs that you personally should personally should pay more pay more attention to how much attention to how much stress you stress you are creating for yourself and whether are creating for yourself and whether your workouts are helping you reduce that stress. Here is reduce that stress. Here is the answer for the answer for many people, though many people, though not for all. Again not for all. Again, there, there are no universal solutions. You are as are no universal solutions. You are as unique as unique as your your your fingerprint. But when you fingerprint. But when you need to, like need to, like the game of Snakes and Ladders you played as a you played as a child, lower your child, lower your cortisol levels. For cortisol levels. For most of my most of my clients, the first thing to clients, the first thing to do if do if you're doing you're doing high-intensity high-intensity high-intensity interval interval interval training is to training is to take a break, not take a break, not because it's bad because it's bad or raises or raises cortisol. In fact, cortisol. In fact, they use they use it appropriately.

it appropriately. We elevate We elevate cortisol for 30 seconds cortisol for 30 seconds or less, fully or less, fully recover, and are recover, and are ready for the next set ready for the next set. This is how. This is how cortisol should be cortisol should be used used used optimally. However, optimally. However, if your if your cortisol levels are already cortisol levels are already off the charts, we off the charts, we simply need to simply need to eliminate eliminate eliminate this targeted this targeted cortisol elevation for a while. “For a certain time” are the. “For a certain time” are the key words.

Go back to Go back to regular regular regular walks. This is why walks. This is why walking can work walking can work wonders. If you are wonders. If you are accumulating accumulating accumulating belly fat, this again belly fat, this again suggests suggests suggests that cortisol may have been that cortisol may have been the cause of the spikes the cause of the spikes in blood sugar that in blood sugar that caused insulin caused insulin to be released to to be released to lower it. But as long as your lower it. But as long as your insulin levels are insulin levels are high, and they high, and they will remain so will remain so will remain so for hours, as long as your for hours, as long as your sugar is being lowered, you sugar is being lowered, you are in are in fat storage mode. And fat storage mode. And you won't be able to you won't be able to burn fat while burn fat while you're in a state of fat you're in a state of fat storage. And storage. And this fat accumulation in this fat accumulation in postmenopausal women is postmenopausal women is most likely most likely to occur right to occur right here, around the waist.

here, around the waist. So, what to do? So, what to do? Try Try Try walking. And walking is walking. And walking is magic because your magic because your body doesn't get body doesn't get the signal to release the signal to release glycogen and trigger a glycogen and trigger a cortisol release cortisol release because walking is a because walking is a comfortable process.

It is not a threat It is not a threat to the body and even to the body and even uses up uses up uses up circulating cortisol. So at the end of. So at the end of the walk, the walk, your cortisol levels are your cortisol levels are actually lower than they actually lower than they were at the beginning. You were at the beginning. You probably probably probably feel more feel more resilient. You resilient. You get a little get a little break just break just from walking, and if you from walking, and if you can walk can walk outside—that's outside—that's outside—that's even better, but walking even better, but walking on a treadmill will on a treadmill will do, too. So do, too. So try to try to try to have have have fun: fun: fun: listen to music or listen to music or watch something on watch something on TV if TV if you want. Walk you want. Walk outdoors, if outdoors, if at all possible.

at all possible. These things will help. I These things will help. I always recommend always recommend continuing strength continuing strength training, but training, but be careful with the be careful with the loads.

loads. Make them short. Make them short. Make them Make them purposeful.

Adjusting Effort as Hormones and Goals Change

purposeful. Work your major Work your major muscle groups muscle groups by performing six by performing six to eight different to eight different exercises, one for exercises, one for each muscle group, in each muscle group, in two workouts per two workouts per week. Do a week. Do a quality workout, quality workout, but leave time between but leave time between them for walks them for walks to allow for to allow for full full full recovery. It's like a recovery. It's like a game of "rises and falls ". You can have 40 years of ". You can have 40 years of training experience, training experience, love sports, but love sports, but sometimes you still sometimes you still cross the line, cross the line, reach a reach a cortisol peak, because life cortisol peak, because life challenges you. At the challenges you. At the same time, your same time, your hormones are changing.

hormones are changing. At the same time, you're At the same time, you're trying to achieve trying to achieve certain goals in your certain goals in your training, and at training, and at some point it some point it can all become too can all become too much. The sooner you much. The sooner you react and change your react and change your approach, the easier it approach, the easier it will be for you to get back to will be for you to get back to normal, and you may normal, and you may find that less find that less activity activity activity produces better produces better results for a while than results for a while than more. Please more. Please write in the comments write in the comments if you have any questions.

if you have any questions. Write in the comments Write in the comments if you have if you have encountered this. You do encountered this. You do all the things that you all the things that you know used to know used to work, but now work, but now they don't work. This is for those they don't work. This is for those of you who of you who are probably a more experienced are probably a more experienced athlete. Maybe athlete. Maybe you are a fitness instructor, trainer, instructor, trainer, or athlete who or athlete who loves loves loves endurance training and endurance training and saw results for a long time saw results for a long time,,, then they disappeared. I then they disappeared. I would like to hear from you, would like to hear from you, as well as others who as well as others who struggle with the idea that struggle with the idea that maybe it's worth maybe it's worth pushing yourself, when pushing yourself, when in fact it's the in fact it's the opposite. If you opposite. If you slow down a bit, slow down a bit, let your let your cortisol levels drop, cortisol levels drop, rest, and rest, and focus on focus on recovery, you recovery, you can can can work work work harder again. I look forward harder again. I look forward to to to your feedback.

your feedback. See you on the other See you on the other side.