Chill Out! Body's Brown Fat Supply May Be Key to Weight Loss

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Think all fat is the same white, translucent color? Wrong. Scientists say there's another kind; it's brown, and because it burns calories instead of storing them, it might just help people lose weight, according to a new study published in the Journal of Clinical Investigation and reported by Time magazine.

For the study, researchers from the University Hospital of Sherbrooke in Canada designed a test to determine if brown fat burns calories when humans are exposed to cold temperatures. Scientists exposed six healthy men, ages 23 to 42, to sustained cold temperatures, but not cold enough to cause them to shiver. (Shivering causes the body to burn calories.) Then, scientists carefully monitored each man's metabolism with specific tests to detect if the cold temperature triggered fat burning.

Findings showed all six men burned more calories when they were cold—an average of 250 calories more every three hours—all from the brown fat on their bodies. (Brown fat is common in babies, but adults only have smaller pockets of it in their upper backs and necks.)

"We have proof that this tissue burns calories…. But what happens over the long term is unknown," said André Carpentier, MD, a professor at the University of Sherbrooke.

Researchers don't understand how brown fat's growth is triggered, if cold temperatures contribute to its creation, or if white fat can be transformed into brown fat. What excites scientists about the whole brown fat-cold connection is the possibility that these studies could lead to a new strategy for weight loss.

In the meantime, researchers cautioned weight loss seekers not to consider deliberately chilling their bodies as a way to drop pounds.

Did you know belly fat is a big cause of health problems? Click here to read more.

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