

Weight, BMI, and Body Fat

What They Mean for You

Weight, Body Mass Index (BMI), and body fat are terms used with the topic of obesity and they seem to be everywhere. You might be asking yourself what they mean.

What About Weight?

As you know, we measure weight on a standard scale. Your weight is a number that takes into account your whole body - bones, organs, muscle, water, fat mass, and more. Weight alone cannot really tell us much. It is simply a number. When weight is viewed in relationship to height and to total body makeup, or composition, we can begin to use those numbers to estimate health-related factors such as obesity and physical fitness.

The Buzz About BMI

BMI is a measure of weight for height. As BMI increases, so does the risk for some diseases. Those with a BMI in overweight (25.0 – 29.9) and obese (30.0 and above) ranges can be more at risk for heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and some cancers. If you are interested in finding out your BMI, ask your health care provider or a fitness professional. If you have access to the Internet, you can use a simple BMI calculator to figure your BMI.

One can be found at <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/bmi/calc-bmi.htm>.

BMI is only one indicator of health risk. Other risk factors that affect health can include diet, physical activity level, and blood pressure. Your health care provider can help you determine your health risks and what causes them.

BMI is not a measure of body fat. It is figured using only height and weight and does not tell us how much muscle and fat we have. For example, two people might have the same height and weight so they have the same BMI. However, one person is very muscular and has low body fat, and the other person is not muscular at all and has a high body fat. This can happen because muscle weighs more than fat.

A very muscular, healthy person could have a BMI in the overweight range due to the weight of his or her muscle. That is why it can be helpful to know your body composition.



Concern About Body Composition

You have probably heard the term “body fat percent.” Measuring body fat percentage is one way of finding body composition. Your body composition can be divided into two different categories: fat mass, which is made up of just that, fat; and fat-free mass, which is made up of everything that is not fat – muscles, bones, organs, water, and other tissues in the body. When you have your body fat measured, you are estimating the amount of your body that is fat mass.

All fat is not bad. Fat is very important for cells, it keeps the body warm, and it also cushions the body and provides comfort, such as when you are sitting. However, too much fat can be a risk factor for obesity. An ideal body composition is one with healthy amounts of fat mass and lean mass, or muscle. The average body fat of a healthy person is about 10 percent to 15 percent for men and 15 percent to 25 percent for women. There are several ways to measure body fat. Contact your health care provider or a fitness professional to find out more information.

Body Fat Scales – Are They Worth It?

Body fat scales, or analyzers, estimate the percentage of body fat you have through a process called Bioelectrical Impedance Analysis (BIA). The scale sends a harmless electrical current through your lower body to measure body water. Why body water? Because muscle contains more water than fat does. This electrical current will travel more quickly through the muscle (because of its water content) than it will through fat. The scale can convert the information it has gathered from the electrical current into a number that represents your percent body fat.

There is both good news and bad news when it comes to body fat scales. The bad news is that body fat scales are not always accurate. This means that the scale might say you are 25 percent body fat, and this may not be true. Your body fat could be lower or higher.

The good news is that the scale can measure progress. For example, if you use the scale and find you are 25 percent body fat and then a few months later you measure again and you are 22 percent body fat, you know you have made progress. You might not know if those numbers are true to you, but you do know that you have decreased your body fat by approximately 3 percent.

Keep in mind that the best way to get an accurate body fat measurement is to consult a fitness professional. There are many ways to measure body fat that are offered at most local fitness centers. When deciding whether to purchase a body fat scale, you might find that it is a better use of your money to pay to have your body fat measured every few months by a professional rather than investing in a body fat scale.

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