

**The skinny on figuring body fat: Measure your waist, not BMI**

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Studies show that measuring your waist circumference is a better predictor than BMI of the risk of diseases like type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure.

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**BY**[**RICHARD WEIL, M.ED., CDE**](http://www.nydailynews.com/authors?author=Richard-Weil%2C-M.ed.%2C-Cde)

DAILY NEWS CONTRIBUTOR

Tuesday, August 16, 2016, 6:37 PM

We're all inundated with messages about weight loss and maintaining a healthy weight, but the way the medical community talks about these things has begun to change.

For decades, we've assessed whether an individual is a healthy weight, overweight, or obese by using a screening tool called the Body Mass Index (BMI) — a ratio of weight to height that can be an indicator of body fatness.

But it's not as accurate as it could be.

Over the years, doctors have come to understand the limitations of BMI for estimating body fatness, and acknowledge that in some cases it does not differentiate between people who are heavy for their height due to muscle and those who are heavy due to fat.

For instance, muscular athletes such as football linebackers may be labeled obese even though they have very low body fat. And BMI does not distinguish between patients who are physically active and patients who are sedentary.

Now, some doctors are using a better measure of health. Studies show that waist circumference is a better predictor of an individual's risk of diseases such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and high blood pressure, than BMI.

The recommendation for men is a waist circumference 40 inches or less and women 35 inches or less. For an accurate result, use a flexible tape and measure at the widest part of the belly, usually across the belly button. (Technically, it's an abdominal circumference, but we call it waist circumference.)

BMI is calculated by dividing your weight in pounds by your height in inches squared, and then multiplying that result by 703. If math isn't your strong suit, just check out the calculator at https://www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/assessing/bmi/.

Someone with a BMI under 18.5 is considered underweight, 18.5 to 24.9 is normal weight, 25 to 29.9 is overweight, and 30 and above is obese.

However, if you are overweight but physically active, you could still be healthier than someone with a lower BMI who is sedentary.

The distribution of fat on your body is important. Extra weight on your hips or legs is not as unhealthy as fat around the belly. That's because belly fat is a good predictor of a dangerous fat called visceral fat.

Visceral fat is located deep in the gut around the organs and is associated with a higher risk of diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, some cancers, and other diseases.

Putting it all together, doctors now realize that health is much more than a question of ideal weight. A 55-year-old woman doesn't need to be her high school weight. Instead, she could be overweight but healthy if she is physically fit.

The American Heart Association heart.org and American College of Sports Medicine acsm.org recommend that adults should do moderate-intensity exercise five or more days per week for 30 minutes a day.

And you don't have to do it all at once. You can do it in chunks of 10 or 15 minutes at a time. An alternative approach is 20 to 60 minutes of vigorous exercise three days a week. Moderate-intensity is when you can talk but not sing during the activity, and vigorous is when you cannot talk without having to stop and catch your breath.

It's also recommended to do strength or resistance training two or three days each week.

Exercise is one of the best things you can do for your health. It's incredibly potent regardless of body weight. While exercise alone isn't always enough to make you lose weight (some people compensate by eating more or by being more sedentary for the rest of the day), it does help prevent weight gain.

So getting moving is an important step for weight control, and of course, good health.

There are many commonsense steps you can take to help maintain a healthy weight. You don't have to run a marathon. Instead, think about how you can move a little more.

For example, rather than take the bus, walk for 30 minutes. If you look at your watch, you may find that you can walk to your destination faster than taking the bus.

And small steps add up. Burning just 100 extra calories a day adds up to losing about 11 pounds over the course of a year.

Diet has a role to play too, of course. One key is being mindful while you eat. Eat more fruit and vegetables, and fewer fried foods. Having everything you like, but in moderation, is better than completely denying yourself.

But as much as possible, prepare your own foods and lean towards vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins over prepared foods. And don't keep candy on your desk — that's setting yourself up for failure. Out of sight, out of mind!

If you're a parent, then you're in a position to be a positive role model for your kids, because kids mimic what their parents do.

A recent study found that interventions that helped parents lose weight also helped kids lose weight. As much as possible, take your kids outside to play — that will get the whole family moving.

With even a small dose of exercise you'll be healthier, feel better physically and mentally, and have more energy. No pill does as much for your health as exercise does. Whenever my patients move more they discover all those benefits. You can too.