

Does Body Weight Matter?



Heather Norman-Burgdolf and Emily DeWitt, Dietetics and Human Nutrition



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Our society has trained us to think our body weight directly reflects our health. However, body weight is complex and something about which researchers still are learning. This publication will explain the basics of body weight, body fat, and the relationship between weight and health. Practical strategies are also included to help you focus on overall health rather than weight alone.

What makes up your body weight?

Much more than fat contributes to your total body weight. Water in the body and lean mass, which includes all muscle, organs, and bone, is included, too. Some studies suggest that 2 to 6 pounds of body weight come from the microbiome—the bacteria lining your gut and found on your skin! Although society wants you to think everyone should have a similar number on the scale, that simply can't be true. We all have different body shapes, and our bodies are all different sizes. The number on the scale is not your only measure of health.

Why do we have body fat?

You have probably heard that body fat is bad for you, but we need certain amounts in our body for it to function correctly. There are different types of body fat. Each serves a unique purpose depending on where it is stored in the body. For example, fat in your body protects and cushions internal organs, especially during falls or injuries. Fat also helps regulate how much food we eat and the energy we use to live. Humans use fat to store energy for times when food is unavailable. Fat also provides insulation for warmth. Your body needs fat in each of these ways to survive.

Overweight and Obesity

When the body stores excess fat, experts call it either “being overweight” or “having obesity.” Although both terms mean having more body weight for a specific height, obesity’s definition includes having too much body fat, generally at least 20% above a specific body weight for a person’s height.

Obesity is a condition caused by a combination of factors. Some are factors we cannot control, including genetics, age, the environment in which we live, and certain medical conditions. Some health behaviors we can control include food and beverage choices, physical activity, some medication use, and sleep patterns. These factors are what make excess weight a complex health issue and something that cannot be “treated” in one fixed way.

Health Risks of Being Overweight or Having Obesity

Some people in larger bodies have no health issues, even if health-care providers consider them to be overweight or having obesity. Being healthy at any weight is a result of a well-balanced lifestyle, including nutritious food choices, physical activity, and focusing on mental health.

Weight is not the only factor or best indicator of overall health, but it can influence health outcomes. Having higher body weight puts you at increased risk for certain health conditions, including diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and some cancers, and may cause issues with sleep and joint and mobility issues.

Health and Weight are Not the Same

You may ask, “What is the best body size and weight for me?” A healthy body weight is different for everyone. Even if we all ate and moved our bodies the same way, we would still look different because so many factors contribute to our body weight.

Just because a person appears to be “skinny” does not mean that they have better health than others. It is important to remember that people in smaller bodies can also have serious health problems related to poor nutrition, lack of physical activity, or other serious factors. Similarly, just because a person appears to be in a larger body does not mean that they are unhealthy. For example, no matter the body size, an individual may have an unhealthy relationship with food, experience disordered eating or have an eating disorder, or manage a chronic condition that affects nutrient absorption and their ability to manage weight.

What can you do to take care of your body?

Regardless of body size, we can make choices that prioritize our health and well-being over body size or an ideal weight. Here are a few tips on how to take care of your body that do not focus on weight:

Choose Nutritious Foods When Possible

A well-balanced diet ensures the body receives all the nutrients it needs to work properly. Prioritize the following foods as part of a well-balanced diet:

- Fruits high in fiber, vitamin C, folate, and potassium, such as bananas, berries, oranges, and grapes
- Vegetables high in fiber, vitamin C, vitamin A, folate, and potassium, such as colorful bell peppers, broccoli, carrots, and leafy greens
- Lean-protein foods rich in nutrients such as B vitamins, iron, zinc, and magnesium, including seafood, eggs, beans, peas, lentils, nuts, and seeds
- Whole grains—good sources of energy, fiber, B vitamins, iron, and magnesium—such as brown rice, whole-wheat breads and pasta, and oatmeal
- Dairy products, which are excellent sources of calcium and can provide protein and other nutrients

All foods can fit even when we are mindful of weight and focused on a balanced dietary pattern. Consider focusing on the foods listed above most of the time and enjoying the foods listed below less often in smaller amounts:

- Baked goods high in sugar and fats, such as cookies, pies, and cakes
- Snack foods, such as crackers and chips high in calories, fat, and sodium
- Highly processed meats, such as hotdogs and lunchmeat—often high in sodium
- Fried foods, higher in fat than baked or grilled foods
- Sugar-sweetened beverages high in sugar and calories



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Nutrition is different for everyone and depends on age, height, weight, life stage, and physical-activity level. When building a balanced diet, remember variety in the foods you eat is key. It may be necessary to talk to your health-care provider or a registered dietitian (RD) about nutritious food choices to learn what is right for you or a family member.

Add Movement to Your Day

Physical activity will look different for everyone. This may depend on level of ability, age, experience, or health status. Find ways to be active that feel good for you and your body and that work with your schedule. This approach focuses on moving your body in a way that feels fun and enjoyable and is personal to you. This may help maintain a positive experience while being active and help you be more consistent, supporting your health in the long term. Finding movement that you enjoy is helpful for improving body awareness and increasing confidence among adults.

Physical activity includes any activity that gets your body moving and increases your heart rate. Experts recommend that youths ages 6 to 17 have 60 minutes of physical activ-

ity each day. Adults should participate in 150 minutes of physical activity each week, which breaks down to about 30 minutes per day for five days. Physical activity is important for physical health, increasing overall strength and fitness, mental health, improving mood, and reducing stress. Being strong and fit, regardless of body weight and size, can also lower the risk of many chronic diseases.

Here are some fun ideas for physical activity by yourself or with friends and family:

- Go for a walk or run.
- Play a sport.
- Ride your bike.
- Have a dance party.
- Play charades.
- Swim at a nearby pool.
- Start a garden together.
- Help with yard work.
- Walk the dog.
- Explore a nearby park or walking trail.
- Have weekly goals and competitions for most steps taken, active minutes, etc.

Mindfulness

Incorporate mindfulness practices to further cultivate a healthy relationship with food and movement. You can do this a few different ways:

- Choose to eat a meal outside and enjoy the experience by savoring the food and environment with all your senses. Take in your surroundings and focus on the setting.
- Try to have at least one or more distraction-free meals or snacks each day without technology or a screen. Enjoy conversations with those around you.
- Slow down when eating a meal and savor the food, flavors, and textures. See if you can notice something about the meal or snack that you've never noticed before using one of your senses.
- Try to limit the number of meals and snacks eaten in the car each week so you can focus on eating and enjoying the experience.
- Remove expectations from your activity and focus on what feels good to you. Some days this might be a slow and steady walk or stretching while other days it is a heart-pumping, high-intensity activity.
- Incorporate movement into your everyday life. Gardening, doing laundry, cleaning, playing with children, and taking the stairs at work are all ways to be active without "working out."

How can I help my family and friends take care of their bodies well?

- Be supportive. Making healthy lifestyle choices can be hard and sometimes it is easier if you have someone to do it with you. Social influence can be powerful when making positive change.
- Encourage a balanced diet with variety. Try a new recipe together. Eat meals together regularly and enjoy time well spent.
- Move together. Find simple ways to increase daily physical activity, whether it be a short walk down the street, working in the garden, or parking a bit farther away the next time you go to the store.

- Encourage your local school, worksite, or community to provide easy options for healthy eating and safe places to be physically active.

Weight is only one piece of your overall health puzzle and not the only measure of health. Making healthy lifestyle choices, such as choosing nutritious foods when possible, adding movement to your day, and practicing mindfulness, helps you take care of your body. You do not have to make these choices with a focus on weight.

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