

# BMI, Waist Circumference, and Your Health Risks

*Obesity* is the medical term for having excess body fat. Worldwide, the number of people with obesity has nearly tripled since 1975. In the U.S., more than one-third of adults are now obese. People with obesity are at increased risk for a wide range of health problems, including:

- high blood pressure
- high cholesterol
- type 2 diabetes
- coronary heart disease
- stroke
- gallbladder disease
- osteoarthritis
- sleep apnea
- breast, endometrial, colon, kidney, gallbladder, and liver cancer
- premature death



## What Your BMI Number Means

Body mass index (BMI) is a quick and easy way to screen for obesity. Your BMI is a number calculated from your weight and height; scan the QR code to use the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Adult BMI Calculator to determine your personal number.



Here's what your BMI may mean for your health:

- underweight: BMI below 18.5, increased risk
- healthy weight: BMI 18.5-24.9, lowest risk
- overweight: BMI 25.0-29.9, increased risk
- obesity: BMI 30.0 and above, high risk

Obesity is often further divided into three levels of increasing severity:

- class 1 obesity: BMI 30.0-34.9, high risk
- class 2 obesity: BMI 35.0-39.9, very high risk
- class 3 obesity: BMI 40.0 and above, extremely high risk

## BMI Doesn't Tell the Whole Story

BMI is a simple, inexpensive tool for estimating excess body fat. It doesn't measure body fat directly, however, and it doesn't take differences in body composition into account. For example, a professional athlete and a sedentary individual of the same height and weight might have the same BMI. Yet the athlete's body would likely have much more muscle and less fat.

Among those for whom BMI may not be an accurate indicator of body fatness are bodybuilders, highly trained athletes, older adults, and pregnant women. Your health care professional can help you evaluate whether you are at a healthy weight.

## Why Your Waist Circumference Matters

Another way of estimating your weight-related disease risk is by measuring your waistline. Research has shown that excess abdominal fat puts you at increased risk for developing type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease.

To measure your waist circumference, place a tape measure around your waist, just above your hipbones. The tape should be horizontal and snug, but not pressing into your skin. Exhale and then take the measurement. Your health risks are increased if your waistline is:

- more than 35 inches (88 cm) for women
- more than 40 inches (102 cm) for men

## Reducing Your Health Risks

If you are overweight or obese, losing as little as 5 to 10 percent of your body weight may decrease your health risks. These steps can help move the numbers on your scale downward.

**Make smart food choices.** Choose fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean protein sources, and foods with healthy fats. Limit saturated fats, trans fats, and added sugars.

**Pay attention to calories.** Reducing your calorie intake by 500 to 1,000 calories per day could translate into a weight loss of about 1 to 2 pounds (0.5 to 0.9 kg) per week. Also, not eating enough calories will make it difficult to lose weight. Your body needs a minimum number of calories to function.

**Watch your portion sizes.** At home, use smaller plates, and keep serving dishes off the table so you aren't tempted to have second helpings. In restaurants, split a large entrée with your dining companion or take half of it home. Divide your plate into sections, with half the plate containing fruit and veggies and the other half split between lean protein and whole-grain carbs.

**Get motivated to move.** Aim for at least 150 minutes per week of moderate physical activity. Once you've lost weight, you may need to adjust your activity levels to either lose more weight or maintain your current weight.

**Keep an eye on the numbers.** You may find it helpful to weigh yourself regularly or to measure parts of your body. That way, if your numbers start creeping up, you can adjust your eating or exercise routine.

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