

What You Should Know About Body Fat



Studies show being overweight increases our risk of disease including heart disease, hypertension, certain cancers, diabetes and joint disorders.

How can you lose weight and fat without losing muscle?

Drastically reducing calories (“crash dieting”) may result in weight loss, but of muscle not fat. Weight loss from crash dieting is seldom permanent. Proper weight loss has two sides: modifying eating patterns and committing to a regular, but reasonable, exercise program to build muscle.

There is no way to pick what part of your body you want the fat to come off of. Whether you have excess body fat in your midsection, thighs or arms, the procedure is exactly the same.

Body fat versus weight

A person may have an acceptable weight and figure, but if their body contains too much body fat, their health could be at risk. By comparison, someone who exercises almost every day may weigh the same weight, but because their body is composed of dense, lean muscle, they may be “thinner.” You can be thin or fat at the same weight—depending on your individual fat-to-muscle content.

Healthy Body Fat Range

	<u>Under 30 years old</u>	<u>Over 30 years old</u>
Men	14%-20%	17%-23%
Women	17%-24%	20%-27%

Three simple steps to good health

1. Eat Right

- Changing unhealthy eating habits can help reduce your body fat.
- Eat a low fat diet and avoid saturated fat since it does the most damage to your health.
- Reduce the number of calories, regardless of the source, to what you need for good overall weight. Calories not used are stored in the body as fat.
- Choose most of your food from the grains, fruits, and vegetables groups. These supply low fat, moderate calories with high nutrient and fiber content.
- Reduce simple carbohydrates like white bread and refined pasta.
- If you need to lose weight, reduce your portion sizes and daily calorie intake.

2. Exercise Regularly

- Even if you consumed no fat in your diet (a near impossibility), you still would not reduce your current body fat percentage. In fact, as we age we lose about 250 grams ($\frac{1}{2}$ pound) of muscle each year while we gain 750 grams (1 $\frac{1}{2}$ pounds) of fat. Only as we exercise regularly do we burn excess calories and fat, and build lean body mass—muscle.
- The best exercise to do for reducing body fat percentage is not sit ups, crunches or curls. The best exercise is something that will burn a lot of calories such as walking, running, biking and swimming.
- Because muscle tissue burns more calories than fat tissue, you should include strength training in your workout to build more muscle. This will help you burn even more calories throughout the day.

3. Monitor Your Program

- A method gaining wide support by medical and fitness experts is bioelectrical impedance analysis (BIA). This technology is incorporated into a simple bathroom scale. When you step bare-foot onto the scale, a very safe, low electrical current is passed through the body and body fat percentage is calculated based on the amount of impedance. Current passes much faster through lean muscle than it does through fat. In just seconds you will learn both your current weight and your body fat percentage.
- As you make changes in your eating and exercise habits, measure your body fat percentage in a few months to monitor your progress.

A Word About Body Fat Measurement Techniques

Results from portable body fat analyzers can vary depending on many factors, including the quality of the device and how hydrated you are when the measurement is taken.

If you're concerned about your body fat percentage, ask your doctor about more accurate measurement techniques. Depending on the circumstances, options may include:

- **Dual energy X-ray absorptiometry (DXA).** This is a specialized X-ray exam that provides detailed information about the ratio between fat, muscle and bones in specific parts of the body.
- **Air displacement plethysmography.** With this technique, you're enclosed in a computerized, egg-shaped chamber. The device measures your weight and volume to determine your body density, then uses these figures to calculate your percentage of body fat.
- **Underwater weighing.** During underwater weighing, also known as hydrodensitometry, you're seated on a special chair and submerged under water. Your underwater weight or body density is then used to calculate your percentage of body fat.

Keep in mind that specific body fat measurement techniques can be expensive and may not be available in all locations. Underwater weighing may be available only in specialized research facilities.

Adapted from Health Education Resources and E.R. Laskowski, MD in mayoclinic.com/health/body-fat-analyzers, Mar, 2011.

