

## Weight Management: Body Fat



### How is body fat measured?

Body fat can be measured in several ways, such as:

- **Underwater weighing.** This is also called hydrodensitometry. It is based on the principle that fat tissue is less dense than muscle and bone.
- **Skinfold thickness.** An instrument called a caliper is used to measure the thickness of fat at one or more places on the body.
- **Bioelectrical impedance.** A small electrical current is passed through your body, allowing the electrical resistance of your body to be measured. This resistance along with your height and weight are used to calculate your percent of body fat.

### What do the results mean?

High or very low body fat can put you at risk for health problems. Experts differ in their opinions about what is a healthy percentage of body fat. In general, 10% to 25% body fat is considered healthy in an adult man, and 18% to 32% body fat is considered healthy in an adult woman. Above or below these levels is

considered unhealthy. Talk with your doctor or wellness professional about what your results mean.

Body fat is only one way to see if you are at a healthy weight. Other measures include your weight in relation to your height (measured with a formula called body mass index, or BMI), and the distance around your waist.

### How can you get and keep a healthy body fat percentage?

Ways to stay healthy include:

- **Get regular physical activity.** Any amount helps. Regular exercise will help you lose fat and build muscle, which burns more calories than fat.
  - For general fitness, it is best to do something that gets you breathing hard for at least 2½ hours each week.
  - Doing 60 to 90 minutes of activity a day helps you maintain or lose weight.
- **Don't eat more calories than your body needs each day.** Eat healthy meals that include low-fat foods, whole grains, and lots of fruits and vegetables.
- **Talk with your doctor.** Together, you can decide on the best ways to get your body fat back into a healthy range.

### How do you make changes to become more healthy?

How healthy you are depends not only on how much you weigh, but also on what health problems you have, whether you exercise and follow a healthy diet, and other things like not smoking. Talk with your doctor about what you can do to stay healthy.

At first it can be hard to make changes in your life, such as eating better or exercising. The key is to do just a little at a time. Over time, your everyday choices will become habits. To be successful in making lifestyle changes:

- **Eat healthy—but do not diet.** Diets to quickly lose weight almost always fail and can be hard on your health in the long run. Instead, create a healthy eating plan that works for you.
- **Think about your relationship with food.** Do you eat when you are bored, stressed, or sad? Do you use food as a reward? Try making a list of other ways you can comfort or reward yourself that don't involve food.
- **Slowly change your eating habits.** If you are ready to improve your nutrition, you may be tempted to do a diet overhaul and change everything about the way you eat. But you will be more successful at staying with the changes if you work on one eating habit at a time.
- **Set goals you can reach.** Small goals are best. Your goals should be specific, within your reach, and flexible. A goal to simply exercise more is too general. Instead, make a plan to be active for a certain amount of time each week. For example, start with a goal to walk for 15 minutes 3 times a week, and then slowly increase it to 20 minutes 4 times a week. When you reach this goal and it has become routine, set a new one. You will have setbacks now and then. It does not mean you have failed.

- **Make daily activity a part of your routine.** Identify what keeps you from being active or exercising. Are you juggling a demanding job with raising kids? Maybe you can start a walking group at work during lunchtime. Arrange for someone else to pick up the kids from day care or soccer practice 1 day a week so you can make time for physical activity. Or pick an activity that your family can do together, such as taking a bike ride or playing Frisbee.

## Resources

### National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute

301-592-8573

[www.nhlbi.nih.gov/about/oei](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/about/oei)

### American Dietetic Association

1-800-877-0877

[www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org)

### Weight-Control Information Network

1-877-946-4627

[www.win.niddk.nih.gov](http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov)

### U.S. Department of Agriculture

1-888-779-7264

[www.ChooseMyPlate.gov](http://www.ChooseMyPlate.gov)

### Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

1-800-232-4636

[www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpao](http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpao)