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Fitness or Fatness: Which Matters More to Your Health?

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For years Americans have struggled to shed those unwanted pounds, and have been willing to pay a hefty price in the process. According to a study in the Journal of the American Dietetic Association, nearly 65 million Americans are dieting at any one time, spending over \$50 billion on weight loss annually. And one glance at the New York Times Bestseller List or amazon.com shows that weight loss books are making many health gurus into overnight celebrities.

Why is our culture so consumed with the notion of fat loss? We all know the hazards of being overweight: diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and many other illnesses are commonly associated with obesity. These are no doubt good reasons for Americans to be watching their waistlines.

However, it may be that our country has a misplaced focus on “losing fat” as opposed to “being fit”. Many people struggle to get themselves down to unrealistic numbers on the scale, often sabotaging their nutrition in the process. In the fitness arena, people aim to achieve “fat burning” workouts, and vitamin stores are cramming their shelves with supplements aimed at burning fat. Such efforts are often fueled by the notion that “fat loss” at all costs is the key to good health.

But are the health risks associated with obesity really from excess weight itself, or rather from a lack of fitness commonly associated with obesity? A recent review of several studies found that the lowest death rates occurred in people with highest levels of fitness, regardless of their weight (Source: Today’s Dietitian, March, 2000). The connection seems strongest between fitness level and risk of diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease, with a possible link between fitness levels and certain types of cancers.



Although achieving a healthy body weight is still an important issue, remember that an improvement in fitness levels at any weight may help decrease your risk of disease. In fact, some research suggests you may do more to improve your overall health by setting lifestyle-based goals rather than goals which are weight-based. For example, instead of saying “I will lose 10 pounds by summer”, you may want to say “I will try to eat at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables every day”, or “I will go for a 15 minute walk with my husband every night after dinner”.

By focusing on overall fitness you will likely make several positive changes which will have a greater impact than weight loss alone. Also, choosing a diet that is plant based, rich in whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables and low in fat will likely tip the scales in favor of good health. And many of my clients happily find that when they take a more holistic approach to health, weight loss happens as well.