

Finding a Healthy Weight

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Trying to find a healthy weight? What do you think that number should be?

Make no mistake about it, there's no single magic number when it comes health. While we often strive to reach a "good" number on the scale, weight is only one piece of the puzzle.

It is completely normal for weight to fluctuate over the course of a day or even several days. Scales reflect not only your total body weight, but also any food or beverages you have consumed, your hydration status (you weigh less after sweating heavily during a workout), and even water retention associated with a woman's menstrual cycle. Moreover, scales can be wrong; I have often worked with clients who "didn't like the scale" at the health club and so preferred to weigh themselves at home. For an accurate weight, the best time to weigh yourself is first thing in the morning, after you have emptied your bladder but before you have anything to eat or drink.

Weight varies greatly between people of the same height for reasons such as genetics, bone size, ethnic background. People of African descent, for example, generally have larger bone structure than people of Asian descent. And while we accept that differences such as hair color and foot size are normal variations of the human body many women believe that there is one magic number that is the "ideal" weight for their height.

Although Mother Nature is the only one who truly knows what your own body should weigh for optimal health, the following general equation is helpful to establish a healthy weight range; this equation determines the midpoint, to which you would add or subtract 10 percent, depending on bone size. For women, 100 pounds for the first 5 feet and 5 pounds per inch thereafter. So a woman who was 5'5" should weigh between 113 and 137 pounds. For men, add 106 pounds for the first five feet and 6 pounds per inch thereafter to reach the midpoint of the healthy weight range.

Yet weight alone has limitations because it does not paint a complete picture. Consider, for example, a smoker who may be very thin but who has never exercised a day- while the scale may look like he or she is a healthy weight, they may be underfit, have too little lean muscle tissue, and at high risk for disease such as lung cancer or osteoporosis.

Body fat analysis is another helpful tool to gauge fitness levels. Men and women tend to have different levels of body fat thanks to differences in testosterone and estrogen. A healthy range of body fat for women is 20-27 percent, while for men it is 13 to 17 percent. If you belong to a gym or work with a trainer, ask if they can test your



body fat. Pound for pound, lean muscle tissue weighs more than fat, which means that while you may not see the scale creeping down, if you are increasing lean muscle tissue in favor of fat you are improving your health and fitness levels. This is especially helpful for larger boned people and "power athletes" such as body builders and football players, who may seem heavy on the scale but in reality have little body fat.

Body Mass Index, or BMI, is another tool that health professionals use. The BMI looks at your weight in relation to your height. To determine your own BMI, divide your weight in kilograms by your height in meters squared (kg/m^2). A healthy BMI range is between 21-26, while a higher BMI is associated with an increased risk of heart disease, diabetes and may indicate obesity. Oftentimes simply getting your BMI into a lower range can mean a reduced risk for many diseases.

Waist to hip ratio is another piece of the total health picture. Carrying excess body fat in the abdominal area (also called the "apple shape") is associated with a higher risk of elevated cholesterol, heart disease and type II diabetes. To determine your own waist to hip ratio divide your waist (in inches) measurement by your hips. For women the goal is a ratio that is less than .8, and for men, the goal is less a ratio than 1.

So the next time you step on the scale to decide how good or bad, healthy or unhealthy you must be, remember that weight is only part of the picture. You would be wise to put aside the magazines that tell you how much you should weigh, and instead to look at other indicators such as body fat, BMI and waist to hip ratio as well for a better assessment of fitness levels and disease risk.