

The Wellness News

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Determining a Healthy Weight

We all know how important it is to be at a healthy weight. Maintaining a healthy weight reduces the risk of developing many chronic conditions including diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease. But how do you determine if you are at a healthy weight or at risk for chronic conditions? There are several popular methods, with each method having its own pluses and drawbacks. We will discuss the varying techniques here, allowing you to pick the one that will work best for you.

Body Mass Index (BMI)

What is it?

Body Mass Index (BMI) is one of the most popular methods practiced today to determine if an adult is overweight or at risk for disease. Body mass index (BMI) is a measure of body fat based on height and weight.

How to use it:

There are three ways to calculate your BMI.

1. Use the National Institutes of Health's online BMI calculator
<http://www.nhlbisupport.com/bmi/>
2. Download a BMI chart
http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/guidelines/obesity/bmi_tbl.pdf
3. Plug in your height and weight into the BMI formula

$$\text{BMI} = (\text{Weight in Pounds} / (\text{Height in inches})^2) \times 703$$

Generally, a BMI score of 18.5-24.9 is considered an indicator of a healthy weight.

Below 18.5 is considered underweight, 25-29.9 is considered overweight, 30 and up is considered obese, and anything above 40 is considered morbidly obese.

Pros: The BMI is a very simple and inexpensive method to use, especially if a BMI chart or calculator is available. For the general population, the BMI is useful for determining general risk for chronic disease by screening for weight categories.

Cons: The BMI is not a diagnostic tool, meaning even though a higher BMI seems to be associated with a higher risk of developing chronic conditions, further assessments are necessary to fully determine health risks.

The BMI ignores many important factors outside of height and weight, including gender, age, and muscle mass. This can result in some highly muscular athletes being classified as overweight or people with very little muscle mass being classified as normal or underweight.

It seems that combining the results of the different methods might be the most effective solution for determining if an individual is at a healthy weight. For example, if you have a healthy BMI but a high waist circumference, you might want to consider making some healthy lifestyle changes.

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Waist Circumference & Waist to Hip Ratio

Waist Circumference

What is it?

Waist circumference is a measurement of total abdominal fat. As we continue to learn more about body fat, it is evident that body fat placement is just as important in relation to disease, if not more so, than total body fat percentage. Fat located in the abdominal area is more biologically active and able to do more damage to our bodies than fat collecting in other areas. Excess abdominal fat is associated with increased risk for Type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease, and hypertension.

How to use it:

To measure your waist circumference, take a soft measuring tape and wrap it around your bare midsection, right at your belly button and above the top of your hip bones. Make sure to keep the tape measure level and to breathe normally. A waist circumference above 35 inches for women and 40 inches for men is considered high.

Pros: High waist circumference measurements have a strong relationship with chronic diseases, making it a more reliable measuring tool. It is also an inexpensive and easy method for determining health risks.

Cons: Waist circumference measurement cutoffs do not take into account weight, age, or height of the individual.

Waist to Hip Ratio

What is it?

Taking waist circumference measurements one step further, the waist to hip ratio formula divides the circumference of the waist by the circumference of the hips. This formula is intended to determine where an individual's body fat collects. Because there is such high relationship between belly fat and risk of chronic conditions, but little association between hip fat and chronic conditions, the ratio from this formula is a reliable indicator for rates of mortality and disease. When the waist circumference equals or surpasses the hip circumference, there is an increased risk for obesity related diseases.

How to use it:

Take a soft measuring tape, measure your waist at its narrowest place (commonly at the navel) and then measure the hips at their largest place, over the buttocks. Keep the measuring tape parallel to the floor and level all around. Next, divide your waist measurement by your hip measurement. A ratio of 0.8 or above for women and 1.0 or above for men is considered high risk.

Pros: There is a strong association between waist to hip ratios and predicted mortality. Waist to hip ratio gives more context to body shape than a simple waist measurement.

Cons: There is a considerable amount of measurement error when it comes to placement of the tape measure, especially with two different measurement locations.

Other Methods

There are other means of determining a healthy weight including calculating your percent body fat. Most of the ways to do so are quite expensive and require a professional to perform the test. You can determine an approximate body fat percent by purchasing a scale that also calculates body fat. To get the most accurate results, be sure to use the scale in the afternoon and that you are well hydrated when doing so. Don't use the scale after getting out of the shower as the water on your skin will interfere with the measurement.



Call Your Health Coach for More Information 1-800-433-2320

Sources: <http://www.webmd.com>; <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14483512/>; <http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov>; <http://www.mayoclinic.com>; <http://sportsmedicine.about.com>; <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov>

