

WELLNESS WEDNESDAY

A Measure of Health

Like anything else we do, we often want an objective measure to let us know if we're healthy or not, especially in comparison to others. Out of all the things that normally get evaluated, we're often most aware of our weight, since it can be measured without a trip to the doctor's office! It becomes clear very quickly that it's impossible to determine our health from weight alone, so that's when we tend to start looking to additional objective values. But are we expecting too much from them?

BMI

Body Mass Index (BMI) takes a weight evaluation a step further because it also considers height, and then expresses these measurements as a single numerical value. Based on population studies, a normal, healthy range has been determined to be between 18.5 to 25, with 25 to 30 considered overweight, and over 30 obese.

While this measure is perfectly acceptable for assessing metabolic health of larger populations, it should only be a starting place for individuals. It not entirely accurate for everyone and is more problematic for people who are pregnant, athletes, and the elderly. It also may vary in accuracy for different races and ethnic groups.

Body Fat Percentage

Since BMI doesn't take muscle mass into consideration, body fat percentage is often thought to be a better measure of health since it is estimating the amount of body fat contributing to overall weight. After all, it is body fat that is correlated with negative health outcomes, not muscle mass, bones, and water.

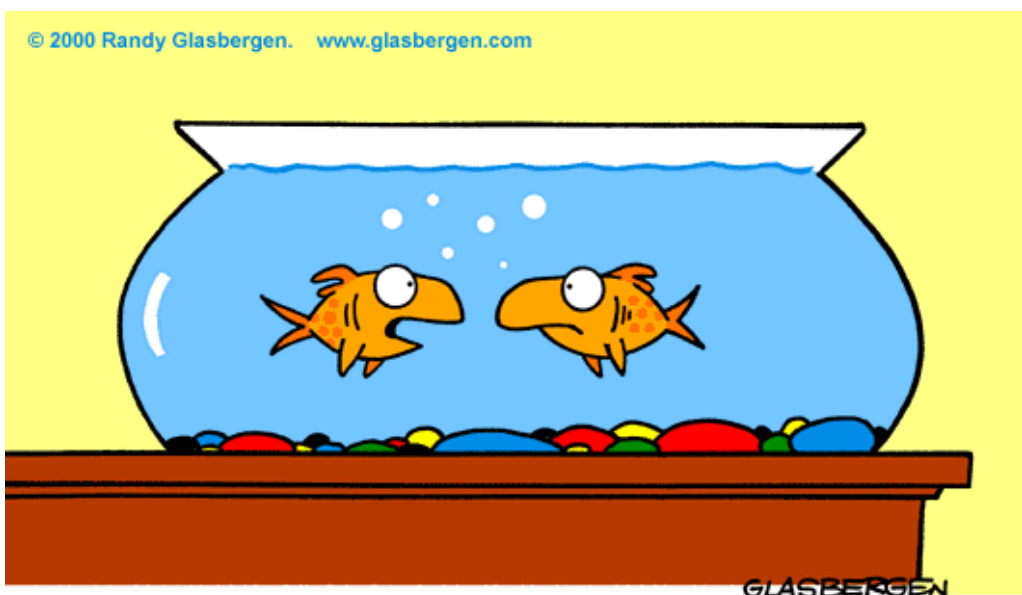
In addition to not being as well studied as BMI, and not having a clear consensus for range recommendations, body fat percentage still doesn't factor in fat distribution. A person could have an overall lower body fat percentage, but still have a significant amount of fat around their waist. Visceral fat accumulation in the midsection still puts a person at higher risk of diabetes and heart disease, even with a "healthy" weight.

Waist Size

Waist circumference is a simple measurement that can help inform either of the values above. People with healthy BMIs or body fat percentages can still be at risk for metabolic illnesses if they have extra fat around the waist. Alternatively, a bodybuilder with a high BMI, due to increased muscle mass, can rest easy if they also have a small waist circumference. In general, men with a waist measurement of 40 inches or below and women with 35 inches or below are in the lower risk categories.

The main thing to keep in mind is that there is no single measure of health, no cutoff value where we know "we're good." Not even weight or body fat! It is all just information that starts a conversation. With things like body composition testing, we can tell if our lifestyle choices are moving us in the desired direction, or if we've relaxed them a little too much. What we can't tell is if we're healthy, since that encompasses much more than a single number.

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/can-body-fat-percentage-determine-whether-you-are-overweight>



“Swimming isn’t enough. Our veterinarian says we also have to pump iron three times a week!”