

New study puts BMI in context as an indicator of health

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A person's body mass index (BMI), once considered an indicator of high body fatness and overall health, isn't such a good indicator of those things after all, according to a recent study published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*. Or at least it isn't without some added context that only the old reliable waistline tape measure can provide, according to North Jersey doctors.

The study's findings suggest that body composition, not just height and weight, needs to be considered when assessing a patient's health and risk of death. The authors say that in some people, higher BMI may actually reflect non-fat tissue such as muscle.

BMI is a person's weight in kilograms divided by the square of height in meters, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. A high BMI can be an inexpensive indicator of high body fatness, says the CDC, and can be used to screen for weight categories that may lead to health problems. By itself, however, it has never been considered diagnostic of an individual's body fatness or health, according to the CDC.

To determine if a high BMI is a health risk, a health care provider would need to perform further assessments, which might include skin fold thickness measurements, evaluations of diet, physical activity and family history, and other appropriate health screenings, according to the CDC.

The prevalence of adult BMI greater than or equal to 30 (obese status) has greatly increased since the 1970s. Recently, however, this trend has leveled off, except for older women. Obesity has continued to increase in adult women who are age 60 years and older.

The new study further confirmed that general health and longevity have more to do with body composition than what a person weighs.

Dr. Melissa Bagloo, director of metabolic and bariatric surgery at The Valley Hospital in Ridgewood, said the study's find-

ings are not surprising. "We've always known that the BMI alone is not the only indicator of a person's health. Patients who

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are centrally obese carry a higher risk for metabolic disease than those who carry it more evenly throughout their body. Yet these two patients may have the same BMI," she said.

"So it makes sense that the percentage of body fat has an association, as well. Think about a body builder. They have a very low percentage of body fat. If you were to only take their height and weight into account, their BMI might be on the higher side. Yet they are all lean body mass," she added.

"You have to look at each patient individually. We know, from a cardiovascular standpoint, that the person who carries all the fat in their belly carries a greater risk of problems. Yet you can still have two people with a BMI of 30, with one exercising routinely and who has high muscle mass, as opposed to the other person, who doesn't. But they weigh the same. Their BMI, if they are the same height, is the same. It doesn't take into account their body composition."

Dr. Ohan Karatoprak, primary care physician with Holy Name Medical Center in Teaneck, said it's all about the waistline. "I have been saying this all along: You have to measure the waistline - and from the belly button, not lower. Some people confuse this with their pants size. No. It has to be measured at the belly button. This is the waist circumference. For women, if more than 35 inches in circumference is measured from around the belly button, that woman is obese - regardless of her BMI. If a man measures more than 40 inches, he is considered obese, regardless of his BMI," he said. "So it's really more about body composition than about how tall someone is and how much they weigh."

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