

Health And Fitness At Every Size

It is more important than ever to understand the difference between fit and fat. Persons can be fit and fat, fit and thin, and unfit fat or thin. Being fit is definitely the more important factor. Yet, as a country we are more overweight than ever. Why is weight the issue of concern? What are the true risks? And more importantly what do we do?

Being overweight has never warranted so much public attention, ridicule, and shame. It is as if body size were the last acceptable bias. Too often the real culprit is far less obvious. Studies continue to reveal an obscene drop in quality and access to health care for persons of “excess” girth. Some studies show health care professionals effectively treating the disease or symptoms for their leaner patients, while heavier clients all too often hear, “If you could lose some weight....” —no matter what the reason for the office visit.

Why the bias? Most people have mindlessly accepted the myth that fat on the body equals disease or at least increased risk of disease. Headlines consistently associate weight with increased risk of everything: diabetes, heart disease, cancers and more. Too often health care professionals echo the tirade. Researchers are often similarly biased. Rather than look at specific metabolic processes as the cause of weight gain, most researchers are stuck on the notion that weight gain causes the metabolic aberrations.

It takes a lot of guts and integrity to look carefully at the data and tease out the untruths that are perpetuated about weight and health. Thankfully, a well respected researcher and a re-known writer have done just that. Glenn A. Gaesser, PhD, authored *Big Fat Lies: The Truth About Your Weight and Your Health* (Gurze Books, 2002). Paul Campos’ *The Obesity Myth: Why America’s Obsession With Weight Is Hazardous To Your Health* will be published in June, 2004 by Gotham Books.

At the heart of the argument is whether being heavier is indeed a factor that puts you more at risk for disease. The answer most often is no! It’s a matter of interpreting the research.

THE PROBLEM WITH BMI

First of all we have a problem with the definition of overweight and fat/obese. Most researchers reflexively use a measure known as BMI (body mass index). This measurement compares one’s weight to height with no attention paid to what comprises the weight. When we fail to consider lean body mass versus fat mass, even lean and fit individuals like many professional athletes and buff movie stars fall into overweight and even obese categories.

Paul Campos famously underscores the absurdity of this measure in his new book by looking at film idols and athletes today. By current government standards, Brad Pitt, Michael Jordon, and Mel Gibson are all considered “overweight”; Russell Crowe, George Clooney and Sammy Sosa are considered “obese”.

Of course, muscle has always been celebrated on men. But the last few decades find us celebrating muscle on women, too. Unfortunately, the weight that muscle contributes is not figured into the equation. Too many women expect to be toned, lean, even buff and still align with certain numbers on the scale. Paul Campos makes this point: If Jennifer Aniston maintained the same BMI as her husband, she would weigh 55 pounds more than she does. Clearly, there are problems with assuming a specific weight is a measure of health and fitness without looking at body composition.

WHAT ARE THE REAL PARAMETERS OF HEALTH?

So BMI as well as weight per se are red herrings. But what are the real parameters of health? As it turns out, the factor that makes the most difference is fitness. But fitness in every sense of the term: physical, physiological, mental, emotional, spiritual. And to be fit takes willingness and skill, especially today. It also takes a great deal of effort to not be swayed by common misconceptions about what it means to be fit and healthy. Because these misconceptions are so common, refer to Chart 1 for a short list of what is not necessarily a sign of health or fitness. (*see below*)

The problem with all these specific attributes and behaviors is that they don't translate exactly into the benefits of being fit (mainly good health, a sense of well being and longevity). But because the rules are absolute they offer an illusion of control. There is something missing in these sound bites of seemingly "healthy" behaviors.

The missing ingredients are balance and perspective. No one attribute conveys fitness. Living a fit and healthy life is often the hardest challenge for people. It is not one single thing but enough of a range of behaviors that successfully brings us to a state of fitness. This balance, this moderation is harder for most people than maintaining any one absolute and focused behavior.

Not Necessarily A Sign Of Fitness Chart 1

Eating low fat	Eating no fast food
Eating low carbohydrate	Rarely eating in restaurants
Being vegetarian	BMI less than 24
Eating no sugar	Weighing the same you did at 18
Eating nothing between meals	Wearing a dress size in single digits
Not eating after 6 P.M.	Sporting a "six pack"
Shopping only at health food stores	Looking like a model or body builder
Cooking everything from scratch	Taking supplements

FOUR BASIC PRINCIPLES OF FITNESS

So where to start.? I always like to establish a place to ground myself that is simple and focused. So here are four basic principles of fitness you can try on for yourself.

1. **Fitness means eating well.** Honoring the body's need for food is paramount. Learning how to successfully navigate this incredibly confusing, overwhelming, frustrating arena is challenging. Eating well is about food purchasing and preparation, meal planning at home and food selection eating out, it is how to navigate an incredibly indulgent environment that encourages one to consume regardless of your physical state.

It starts with eating when you are hungry, not starved. Eating until you are satisfied, not necessarily full or stuffed. It means choosing the balance of protein, carbohydrate and fat that works for you.

2. **Fitness means moving regularly.** Our physical bodies metabolize energy—both glucose and fat— more effectively after physical activity. When we use our food more effectively for fuel, everything works better: brain cells, muscle cells, immune system cells, all cells. It's no wonder that after people move vigorously they often comment, "I feel better." And this has little to do with a "runner's high". How ironic that the technological wonders of this world that make it easy for us to be productive in a sedentary state actually work against us metabolically. We need to move to function at our best no matter what age or fitness level.

3. **Fitness means monitoring what is enough.** Our lives can easily careen out of balance. I have observed that it takes more energy to do all things in moderation than to do one thing in excess. How outrageous that we continue to celebrate the extremes that so often lead to the very behaviors that contribute to poor health. In the quest for greatness or fame people abandon the very foundations of true fitness: adequate rest , enough sleep, good hygiene, along with balanced nutrition and regular activity and play. The key is knowing how to say yes and no.

4. Lastly, **fitness is important in our emotional and spiritual lives.** This means living in a way that is grounded and keeping priorities in perspective. It is that out of balance place that triggers the most unbalanced of behaviors. Too much and/or too little attention to basic needs leads to unhealthy relationships in many facets of our lives. Our life's work is learning how to nurture ourselves at any one place or time so that food and other factors of life can maintain their rightful place.

Integrating these elements of fitness in our lives is everyone's challenge. Being mindful of these factors is the first step. Take time to consider and plan what you can do without setting yourself up for failure. Next, take action on any one or two items. Allow yourself to assess whether or not these changes are effective. The opportunity to evaluate and change course is what the process of being fit is all about.

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