

**LINDA BUCH-BODY LANGUAGE-JANUARY 6, 2002**  
**"BODY FAT RATIO MORE IMPORTANT THAN WEIGHT"**

*"I know that body fat percentage is more important than weight , but how do I find my percentage? L.C., Westminster*

"I need to lose some weight," is probably the most repeated sentence in America. But "weight" per se is only a small piece of the body puzzle. The bigger truth answers the question, "What percentage of your body is composed of fat?" The unfortunate reality for most of us is "too much."

Body fat is extremely necessary for our survival. It cushions our organs, insulates us from the elements, and is the richest source of energy in our body. It behooves us, therefore, to have body fat, we just don't need to be so possessive of it. According to the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 60% of Americans are now considered obese. This population is, by the medical definition of "obese," at least 30 percent over ideal body weight. How much is *too* much and how do we find out how much we have?

The bathroom scale does not tell us everything we need to know about body composition. Take two people of identical height, sex, age, and weight. One will be in a pair of size 28 Levi's and the other will be in a size 36. The difference between the two is the ratio of body fat to lean mass. But does being thin automatically mean healthy? Not necessarily. Two individuals of the same height, sex and age, one weighing more than the other, but both wearing the same size 501's, probably means the heavier person has more muscle and less fat than the lighter person.

Obtaining your exact percentage of body fat is the tricky part. Let's face it, outside of autopsy, we are never going to get an EXACT percentage.

The easiest way to check body fat is via the "naked truth" test. Check yourself out critically in the mirror. If you can "pinch an inch" (or worse, "grab a slab") just below and to the immediate right of the navel , you are probably too fat.

Another method for calculating whether or not you are over fat is the Body Mass Index (BMI). This requires a bit of math (trust me-get a calculator!) but can be calculated as long as you know your weight and height. First, recalculate your body weight in kilograms (your weight in pounds **divided** [corrected from original error which said "X"] by 2.2). Next, convert your height in inches to meters and then square it (divide your height in inches by 39.4 to get meters, then take that number times itself). Divide your weight by your height (squared) to obtain your BMI. Federal guidelines now recommend a BMI below 25. For women, obesity begins at 27.5 and for man it begins at 28.5. This is not a "percentage body fat," per se but does give you a number (we Americans LOVE numbers) to see where you stand regarding personal corpulence.

The most popular body fat percentage calculator is the skinfold caliper method. This requires a skinfold measurement from at least three-to-seven areas of the body (at areas from the triceps, back, hip, front thigh, chest and abdominals) which are added together and checked on a chart delineated by sex and age. It is important not only to have this done by an experienced exercise professional, but also to have the same person check it again a few months into your exercise program in order to provide some semblance of measuring consistency. Keep in mind that the fat being measured is only that which is stored under the skin. Fat located around the organs and in the muscle will be missed. These measurements are useful because, over time with proper exercise and diet, you can see all of the numbers in the measured sites come down.

Another gadget on the market is the bioelectrical impedance scale which sends an imperceptible electrical current through the body to measure the amount of water therein. The scale calculates the body fat by reading where the water is NOT located (water is only located in fat-free tissue). Again, the accuracy is specious because so many factors can skew the readings, like levels of hydration or whether you weighed pre- or post- exercise. If you purchase one of these for your home, be sure to use it at the same time of the day on the same day of the week for better accuracy.

Underwater weighing has almost gone the way of rotary dial phones. In its place as the "gold standard" is the DEXA (Dual Energy Xray Absorptiometry) at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center for Human Nutrition. This machine (a reading costs about \$250) was designed to read bone density but was found to do an amazing job of measuring body fat and lean mass as well. The computer also gives you a color picture of where you fat is located...which, unfortunately, many of us can already see by looking in the mirror.