

Fitness Levels: Assessing your True Shape

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For Current Health

So you think you're in good shape. What's your criterion? How far you can run? How much you can bench press? Well, even a marathon runner, a trophy-winning bodybuilder or the strongest powerlifter can fall short when it comes to complete physical fitness.

Maybe you gauge your fitness against generalized standard measure, like one of those height/weight/body frame charts or a bathroom scale. Don't - both are very misleading indicators.

To be truly physically fit, you need to be well conditioned in four key areas: cardiovascular endurance, flexibility, body composition, and muscle strength and endurance. Each is integral to good health. You may be able to bench press 300 lbs., but to be totally fit, you must follow an all-inclusive exercise routine that targets all four areas.

Cardiovascular endurance (efficient transport of oxygen to muscles via the heart, lungs and blood vessels) lowers blood pressure and resting heart rate, reduces arterial plaque and body fat, and prevents cardiac disease. Muscular strength and endurance increase lean body mass (muscle and bones) enable the body to burn more fat by increasing the basal metabolic rate, and increase energy levels. Flexibility increases balance and coordination and maintains healthy joints and muscles. Good body composition prevents conditions such as arthritis, back pain, heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes.

Body Composition: Overweight vs. Over-fat

Cardiovascular or muscular fitness can be relatively easy to determine. Body composition is bit more complex. Standard measures are misleading. Also, many people are confused about terminology. They equate being overweight with being over-fat, or obese. But being overweight doesn't necessarily mean you are obese.

Obesity, indicated by too much body fat, is a clinical condition dangerous to your health. Consequences include hypertension, high cholesterol, diabetes, heart disease, and some types of cancer. Men are considered obese when body fat exceeds 20% of their total weight. For women, the figure is 30 percent. On the other hand, being overweight simply means you weigh more than the generally accepted standards for your height and frame. It doesn't mean that you are fat or out of condition.

Unfortunately, the accepted standards are determined by typical height/weight/frame charts that are designed too simplistically to accurately determine fitness. They don't take into account differences between bone length, circumference and density, nor body fat percentage and muscle tissue. So, the information is essentially meaningless. Body fat percentage is actually what determines fitness. Someone can be in great physical

condition—with a very low percentage of body fat—and still be as much as 30 pounds above his or her “ideal weight.” A person who has achieved increased muscularity through resistance training will very likely appear to be overweight, because muscle is heavier than fat. Conversely, someone can have a normal weight according to the charts yet have an unhealthy level of body fat. It’s even possible for someone underweight by these standards to have poor body composition. Don’t think that because you’re “thin” that you’re in good health. It’s still possible you could have an excess amount of fat compared to the amount of muscle.

Ideal Body Weight

The uselessness of such charts is more glaringly underscored when someone whose fat level is way too high is indicated by such a chart to be at his or her ideal weight.

Actually, there is no such thing as a universal “ideal body” weight. Ideal body weight is a very individual measure, and it is determined by such factors as gender, age, heredity, lifestyle, body frame (bone size) and body type: ectomorph (tall and thin), mesomorph (stocky, muscular), endomorph (large boned, round figure). Achieving your ideal body composition is the product of exercise combined with sound nutrition.

Sidebar 1

How Fit are you Really?

You can get a good idea. Heart rate is a general indication. How many times does your heart beat per minute? Take your pulse and find out. The average for men is 70 BPM. Women’s average 75 BPM.

Another good indicator is body composition. A healthy percent of body fat is 12 to 18 for men and 18 to 25 percent for women. A physician can administer the most accurate tests. Examples include hydrostatic (water) weighing; bioelectrical impedance; and the skinfold measurements.

Fitness tests you can perform at home include the push-up test, which measures muscular endurance. See how many you can perform. Fifty is a very good score for men while 30 is good for women. Test your flexibility by sitting on the floor and reaching as far as you can. If you can touch your toes or the bottom of your feet, you have good flexibility. To test your cardiovascular endurance, perform aerobic exercise for five minutes and rest for three. Test your heart rate. If it returns to what it was before exercise, then you are in good cardiovascular shape.

Also, ask yourself lifestyle questions. Do you exercise at least three times a week? Do you regularly participate in recreational sports such as basketball or tennis? Do you stretch before and after physical activity? Do you use both anaerobic and aerobic exercise? Do you smoke or drink alcohol? Do you follow sound nutritional guidelines?

Sidebar 2 Fitness Tips

Overall fitness requires a balanced fitness program focuses on cardiovascular, muscle strength, muscle endurance, and flexibility.

For cardiovascular endurance, engage in aerobic exercise such as power walking, treadmill, stationary bike, jogging, running, bicycling, swimming, cross-country skiing, and rowing. Muscular strength can be obtained through resistance training such as weight lifting. Muscular endurance is obtained by increasing the number of repetitions in resistance training or by performing calisthenics such as push-ups, pull-ups, and sit-ups. Flexibility is obtained through systematic range of motion exercise such as toe touching. Yoga exercises also increase flexibility.

Fitness can also be integrated into your daily life by engaging in recreational activities such as informal “pick up” games (e.g., basketball, volleyball); social exercise such as walking or bicycling with a friend or spouse, and by seeking out “hidden exercise” opportunities, especially those related to work. Park your car in the last row of the company lot. If you take a bus, get off at an earlier stop. Use the stairs instead of the elevator. During lunch, jog, walk or skate in the local park. Join your company’s fitness program. Almost half of all employers in the United States now offer one. If yours doesn’t, then volunteer to coordinate an aerobics class.