

Body Composition

What is it?

Body composition refers to the constituents of your body - lean mass, fat mass, and water.

Scales weigh total body mass. What the scale does not tell you is whether that weight is fat, lean (which includes bone, ligaments, and muscle) or water. Your body composition is more important than your weight in determining fitness and health.

Too High or Too Low?

Excess fat may be partly genetic, but mostly results from poor exercise and nutritional habits. If your percentage of fat is excessive you may want to make some lifestyle changes. Obesity raises one's risk of getting heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and cancer. Excess fat weight stresses the cardiovascular system and reduces the body's ability to work efficiently.

Some elite athletes have body fat percentages as low as 5% for men and 8% for women, but this, of course, is the exception and extremely low body fat can be very risky. In females, low body fat percent can alter hormone levels, stopping menstrual periods and causing osteoporosis. In extreme cases organ failure, and even death can occur.

All of us require stored body fat for fueling energy- **if the body has too little fat, it will begin to break down muscle tissue** in order to satisfy energy requirements.

Ideal Body Fat Percentages

Body fat percentage refers to the percentage of the total body weight that is made up of fat. This percentage

varies for men and women. *For men*, the ideal percentage of body fat is between 12 and 18%. Over 25% body fat for men is considered obese. *For women*, the ideal percentage of body fat is between 16 and 25%, with over 30% being considered obese.

Measuring Composition

Underwater weighing, available at some fitness centers, hospitals, and clinics, is considered the most accurate measurement tool. Since fat tissue is more buoyant than lean tissue, an over-fat person will actually weigh less underwater than will a leaner person. Underwater weighing is unrealistic for the average person because of convenience and expense.

Another tool for measuring body fat is a **skin-fold caliper**, which measures the fat below the skin's surface. Although it is less accurate than underwater weighing, for most people it is more convenient. Skin-fold tests are free to students enrolled at UW-Stevens Point. If you are interested in obtaining a skin-fold body fat assessment contact the Lifestyle Assistant Office in 101 Delzell Hall.

Maintenance

For optimum health and fitness, it pays to maintain your body composition within the recommended norms. Regular exercise and a nutritional diet go hand-in-hand in maintaining a balanced body composition. Aerobic exercise—the kind that uses large muscle groups for an extended period of time—uses oxygen to burn fat for energy. A diet low in dietary fat and high in complex carbohydrates (whole grains and vegetables) can improve your body's energy reserves with a relatively low intake of calories.

