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Fit Vs. Fat

It's time to stop using a scale as the best indicator of overall health and wellness

by: Jill Barker

Back in the mid-1990s, when researcher Steven Blair introduced the idea that thinness wasn't synonymous with fitness, chubby fitness fanatics everywhere rejoiced.

His landmark study was the first to suggest that fitness trumped fatness when it comes to overall health, concluding that a lack of exercise poses a greater risk to health than being overweight. Blair's results, along with several subsequent studies confirming his findings, sparked the term "metabolically healthy obesity," which is defined as being overweight (a body mass index above 30) without the associated high blood pressure, abnormal blood sugar and elevated cholesterol levels often associated with carrying excess weight.

While there's been some debate about the wisdom of downplaying the health risks of obesity, many see it simply as a way to sell the benefits of regular exercise to a population that may find it easier to increase fitness than decrease fatness. Since regular exercise has proven effective in reducing mortality even among the severely obese, it's clear that being fit can mitigate the health risks associated with being overweight.

But that's not the only silver lining for anyone who carries excess weight. A significant number of studies have published results suggesting that overweight individuals with cardiovascular disease have a better survival rate than their slimmer colleagues with the same level of disease. It's dubbed "obesity paradox," but don't get the idea that it's OK to embrace the extra weight you've put on since high school. If those pounds have proved difficult to shed, it's worth noting that fit individuals with heart disease had a lower risk of mortality independent of body weight and age.

But this isn't just a good news story for the XL crowd. It's also a word of warning to the over-40 population who tend to gain weight and exercise less with each passing decade. This double whammy of lifestyle changes has the potential to whittle away at life expectancy and quality of life even if you've never had to worry about your weight before the arrival of your middle years.

Yet if a certain degree of slowing down and beefing up is considered inevitable with age, perhaps the discussion should focus on putting more effort into exercise than into staying slim during those middle years and beyond.

"With aging it is conceivable that maintaining healthful levels of fitness may be more important than preventing modest weight gain," Blair said.

Yet not everyone who's overweight carries the same degree of risk to their health. Abdominal fat has a far greater effect on mortality than fat carried anywhere else on the body, a fact that holds true even among those who wouldn't be classified as overweight.

Whittling away at waist circumference remains worth the effort despite news that it takes less exercise to improve health than it does to lose weight. And faced with the reality that exercise alone isn't a very effective intervention when it comes to getting rid of unwanted inches, it's nice to know that your efforts in the gym won't be in vain, despite the fact that the numbers on the scale may not change significantly.

In fact, it's time to stop using the scale to determine success in the gym. Exercise is truly its own reward - at least as far as life expectancy is concerned.

So how much exercise does it take to reap the rewards of being fit? Not as much as you may think. Thirty minutes of moderate intensity exercise most, if not all, days of the week should do the trick. And it doesn't have to be done in the gym. A brisk walk, bike ride or swim will get the job done. It does however have to be aerobic exercise, which means yoga lovers and those who pump iron need to include some form of sustained activity that raises heart rate and oxygen consumption into their workout schedule.

The best news of all is that it's never too late to get in shape. Men who went from unfit to fit in a study that spanned five years experienced a 44 per cent drop in all-cause mortality. The opposite occurred in fit individuals who joined the ranks of the unfit. They saw their mortality risk increase as their commitment to regular exercise waned.

As for all the shaming around obesity, the time has come to sell the idea that becoming fitter is more important for health than becoming thinner.

Photo: John Mahoney / It's clear that being fit can help mitigate the health risks often associated with being overweight, but it doesn't need to be your only measure of success.;

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