



## Can You Be Overweight and Healthy?

When you work in the fitness and health industry long enough as I have you see a lot of different body types. Eventually you arrive at some sort of analogy like this. Bodies are like cars, they all more or less get you where you're going but some will use less gas in the process or may break down less often. Some will have more curb appeal and a better resale value and others are very comfortable but need some touching up. If you look under the hood sometimes that great body doesn't have such a great engine and other times that car with the great engine may need some bodywork. Okay so enough with the car comparisons, what I really want to talk about is something that has been debated greatly in the health industry for quite some time.

Can you be overweight and healthy? Can you carry excess body fat and yet perform or even outperform others of normal body weight for your age and gender? Do you get sick a lot or are you heavy and rock solid but by definition overweight? Enquiring minds want answers. There is an overwhelming presumption in our country that if an individual is overweight they are also unhealthy. Research clearly supports that being overweight *is* a major health risk factor, contributing to an increase in cardiovascular disease, diabetes, stroke, and many types of cancer.

Most morbidity and mortality tables (disease and death) convincingly draw the link between BMI values and disease states however more and more scientists are questioning the value of weight over fitness and as the preeminent health indicator.

Steven N. Blair, who heads the Cooper Institute, defends the role of fitness as a major determinant of health regardless of one's weight. "We've studied this from many perspectives in women and in men and we get the same answer: It's not the obesity—it's the fitness," Blair said. "Fitness can substantially reduce, if not eliminate, the high risk of being obese."

Results of studies done by Mary Fran Sowers and Judith Wylie, obesity researchers at the University of Michigan, showed that thin, unfit people could develop heart problems that fat but fit people often do not. Kelly Brownell, Director of the Yale Center for Eating and Weight Disorders, concluded in a 2003 study that heavy people that are fit have a lower risk of heart disease than thin people who are unfit.

Study after study goes on now to add further support behind the fitness argument and they all conclude making the point that physical activity will usually offset some of the effects of excess weight, especially if it's just a few extra pounds. The long standing traditions of the healthcare industry may be missing the mark and doing a disservice to overweight clients and patients with the typical approach of focusing so heavily on nutritional changes. Exercise is always recommended of course but the main emphasis has been on cutting calories. Surely the goal should be to improve the overall health first. Most people start with a diet, which usually brings up feelings of deprivation, boredom, and some serious confidence issues. Diet motivation is often temporary at best because cravings and sugar depletion can play real havoc with your psyche. Ironically, when exercise is adopted, individuals now often report feeling more in control of their dietary habits. You want to eat properly to fuel the new active lifestyle and that makes sense. Emotional outlook, physical strength, and self-esteem all seem to improve with this basic lifestyle changes.

There really is no argument that taking off excess pounds improves health. It is a well known documented fact that losing as little as 5% of overall body weight results in significant improvement in the markers that determine health. And, although it is true that changing dietary intake results in faster weight loss than exercise alone the chances of a long last dietary change are more remote than the chances of a long lasting exercise program.



### **Chill Out, You'll Live Longer**

Years ago someone once said to me, "Don't sweat the petty things and don't pet the sweaty things. Well at least the first part of that still makes some sense to me today. How we perceive our life and the world around us goes a long way in determining our personal experience with health. Notice I didn't say our fitness, but our health. Fitness is managed primarily through physical activity and may be independent of our health. Consider the following two situations and ask yourself, what is both similar and dissimilar about them at the same time.

1. You have been nominated to deliver the valedictorian address at your high school graduation ceremonies. The entire student body, parents and faculty will be present.
2. One of your friends pressured you into skydiving for your 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. The plane develops engine trouble during your first jump and you exit quickly at 5000 feet. Your main parachute malfunctions on the way down but luckily your reserve chute opens okay. You float down to earth heading directly for a busy express highway.

Clearly both of these are stress producing situations for most people. That is the similar part. How are they dissimilar? One of these people will definitely walk away at the end of their ordeal to face another day. Surprisingly a number of studies suggest more people are fearful of facing an audience than facing death. This means the guy giving the eulogy at your funeral some day is probably more stressed out by the whole thing than you are lying there in the coffin.

So, what about people that face stressful situations everyday, what can we learn from them? I'm talking about fireman, the police, soldiers and many others.

With apologies to the mental health profession for this oversimplification, the following 3 behaviours seem to be key.

- Don't place blame on things you can't control. When you do, this disempowers you and won't allow you to really seek out the truth. It is also a little too convenient; you call off the hunt so to speak because you cannot control it. Pick your battles and watch out for those knee jerk excuses that cause you to lose sleep.
- Frequent daily rewards for goals achieved is the next solution. Waiting for the one big reward is too big an upset if it doesn't happen. Small personal rewards will have greater significance if you know that next pleasurable experience is just around the corner. It could be something as simple as the time you award yourself to have a hot bath or listen to some music. Don't under estimate the significance of time as a reward.
- Face the truth. We often put off confrontations and big decisions because of the perceived "big moment", where our world changes forever or falls apart as we know it. Then when that moment does arrive we have blown it so out of proportion we are just overwhelmed. Look behind what appears to be the obvious problem for the hidden problem, then break down the situation into its simplest parts and tackle each of those parts as a separate manageable challenge. When you do this it won't seem so daunting.

Fit people tend to be healthy people and healthy people tend to be fit people, but there are no guarantees. Fitness has its own set of challenges and sometimes this pursuit of the ideal can result in overstress and weakening of our immune system. This further can lead to reduced health.

Maybe this sums it up:

**Eubie Blake (On his 100th Birthday) Famous musician**

If I'd known I was going to live this long, I'd have taken better care of myself.