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www.uptodate.com ©2013 UpToDate®**Patient information: Health risks of obesity (The Basics)**Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What does it mean to be obese? — Doctors use a special measure called “body mass index,” or BMI, to decide who is underweight, at a healthy weight, overweight, or obese. A person who is obese weighs way too much for his or her height.

Your BMI will tell you whether your weight is appropriate for your height ([figure 1](#)).

- If your BMI is between 25 and 29.9, you are overweight.
- If your BMI is 30 or greater, you are obese.

Being obese is a problem, because it increases the risks of many different health problems. It can also make it hard for you to move, breathe, and do other things that people who are at a healthy weight can do easily. Plus, being obese can be hard emotionally, because it can make you feel ashamed or like you don't fit in.

What are the health risks of being obese? — Being obese increases a person's risk of developing many health problems. Here are just a few examples:

- Diabetes
- High blood pressure
- High cholesterol
- Heart disease (including heart attacks)
- Stroke
- Sleep apnea (a disorder in which you stop breathing for short periods while asleep)
- Asthma
- Cancer

Does being obese shorten a person's life? — Yes. Studies show that people who are obese die younger than people who are a healthy weight. They also show that the risk of death goes up the heavier a person is. The degree of increased risk depends on how long the person has been obese, and on what other medical problems he or she has.

Should I see a doctor or nurse? — Yes. If you are overweight or obese, see your doctor or nurse. He or she might have suggestions on ways to lose weight.

Are there medical treatments that can help me lose weight? — Yes. There are medicines and surgery to help with weight loss. But those treatments are only for people with severe obesity who have not been able to lose weight through diet and exercise. Also, weight loss treatments do not take the place of diet and exercise. People who have those treatments must also change how they eat and how active they are.

What can I do to prevent the problems caused by being obese? — The obvious answer is that you can lose weight. But even if weight loss is not possible, you can improve your health and reduce your risk if you:

- **Become more active** — Many types of physical activity can help, including walking. You can start with a few minutes a day and add more as you get stronger.
- **Improve your diet** — No single diet turns out to be better than any other. It is healthy to have regular meal times and smaller portions, and not to skip meals. Avoid sweets and processed snack foods, and instead eat more vegetables and fruits.

- **Quit smoking** (if you smoke)
- **Limit alcohol** – Drink no more than 1 drink a day if you are woman, and no more than 2 drinks a day if you are a man.

What increases a person's risk of being obese? — The thing that increases a person's risk the most is having an unhealthy lifestyle. Most people become obese because they simply eat too much and move too little. That's especially true of people who watch too much TV. But there are also a number of other factors that seem to increase the risk of obesity that many people do not know about. Here are some things that might affect a person's chance of becoming obese:

- Mom's habits during pregnancy – Women who eat a lot of calories, have diabetes, or smoke during pregnancy have a higher chance of having babies who grow up to be obese.
- Formula feeding – Babies who are fed formula are more likely than babies who are breastfed to grow up to be obese.
- Habits and weight gain during childhood – People who are overweight or obese as children or as teens are more likely to be obese as adults.
- Sleeping too little – People who do not get enough sleep are more likely to become obese than people who sleep enough.
- Taking certain medicines – Long-term use of certain medicines, such as some medicines to treat depression, can cause a lot of weight gain.

There are also hormonal conditions that can increase the risk of becoming obese, but those conditions are to blame for only a tiny fraction of cases of obesity.

What if I want to have children? — If you want to have children, you should know that being obese can make it hard for a woman to get pregnant. It can also impair a man's ability to have sex, especially if the obese man has high blood pressure or diabetes. What's more, children born to obese parents have a high risk of being obese themselves.

What if my child is obese? — In children, obesity has many of the same risks as it does in adults. For example, it can increase the risk of diabetes, high blood pressure, asthma, and sleep apnea. It can also cause added problems related to childhood. For example, obesity can make children grow faster than normal and speed up sexual development in girls.

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GRAPHICS

Your body mass index (BMI)

		Height, feet and inches														
		5'0"	5'1"	5'2"	5'3"	5'4"	5'5"	5'6"	5'7"	5'8"	5'9"	5'10"	5'11"	6'0"	6'1"	6'2"
Weight, pounds	150	29	28	27	27	26	25	24	24	23	22	22	21	20	20	19
	160	31	30	29	28	28	27	26	25	24	24	23	22	22	21	21
	170	33	32	31	30	29	28	27	27	26	25	24	24	23	22	22
	180	35	34	33	32	31	30	29	28	27	27	26	25	24	24	23
	190	37	36	35	34	33	32	31	30	29	28	27	27	26	25	24
	200	39	38	37	35	34	33	32	31	30	30	29	28	27	26	26
	210	41	40	38	37	36	35	34	33	32	31	30	29	29	28	27
	220	43	42	40	39	38	37	36	35	33	33	32	31	30	29	28
	230	45	44	42	41	40	38	37	36	35	34	33	32	31	30	30
	240	47	45	44	43	41	40	39	38	37	35	34	34	33	32	31
	250	49	47	46	44	43	42	40	39	38	37	36	35	34	33	32
	260	51	49	48	46	45	43	42	41	40	38	37	36	35	34	33
	270	53	51	49	48	46	45	44	42	41	40	39	38	37	36	35
	280	55	53	51	50	48	47	45	44	43	41	40	39	38	37	36
	290	57	55	53	51	50	48	47	45	44	43	42	40	39	38	37
	300	59	57	55	53	52	50	48	47	46	44	43	42	41	40	39
	310	61	59	57	55	53	52	50	49	47	46	45	43	42	41	40
	320	63	61	59	57	55	53	52	50	49	47	46	45	43	42	41
	330	64	62	61	59	57	55	53	52	50	49	47	46	45	44	42
	340	66	64	62	60	58	57	55	53	52	50	49	47	46	45	44
350	68	66	64	62	60	58	57	55	53	52	50	49	48	46	45	
360	70	68	66	64	62	60	58	56	55	53	52	50	49	48	46	
370	72	70	68	66	64	62	60	58	56	55	53	52	50	49	48	
380	74	72	70	67	65	63	61	60	58	56	55	53	52	50	49	
390	76	74	71	69	67	65	63	61	59	58	56	54	53	51	50	

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|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Lowest risk to your health (BMI of 18-24) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Increased risk (BMI of 25-29) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Highest risk (BMI of 30 or higher) |

Find your height (in feet and inches) in the top row. Then find your weight (in pounds) in the first column. Now find where the column for your height and the row for your weight meet. That is your BMI. For example, if you are 5-feet-9-inches tall and you weigh 260 pounds, your BMI is 38. You can also go online to www.uptodate.com/patients and search for "BMI." There you will find a calculator that will tell you what your BMI is if you type in your height and weight.