What does my BMI really mean?

What is the benefit of calculating BMI, since height and weight are the only variables? It seems that you can't really figure out your ideal weight just by looking at a chart. — Don, Staten Island, New York

BMI, short for body mass index, is a measure of your body fat relative to your height and weight. It can be calculated by plugging those two variables into a formula (like this one), which is supposed to provide insights into your health. A “normal” result is between 18.5 and 24.9. If your BMI falls below that, you’re underweight. If it’s above that range, you are considered overweight or obese. The conventional wisdom goes: The higher the number, the higher the likelihood you’ll develop weight-linked conditions, such as diabetes and heart disease.

Like any single measure of health, though, BMI isn't perfect. We are all shaped differently. And what a person weighs isn't purely determined by how much fat they have, but the weight of their muscles, bones, water and organs. Personally, I always feel like I should be allowed to deduct the weight of my hair.

Additionally, two people who weigh the same and wear the same-sized clothes may have totally different distributions of fat and muscle. BMI doesn't account for this. It's why it's a less-reliable indicator of health for pregnant people, athletes and older people.

"BMI breaks down when you have a lot of muscle mass — in this case the BMI is high but it is muscle and not fat," says Caroline Apovian, co-director of the Center for Weight Management and Wellness at Harvard Medical School.

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The measure has other weaknesses. Body composition varies not just across individuals, but among racial and ethnic groups. BMI is largely based on White populations, and it doesn't account for age, race or even gender — though some people have pushed for it do so. Really, BMI is a more useful number when examining public health more broadly.

"On a population basis, BMI works well for mortality risk," says Apovian. "On an individual basis, it breaks down."

Some recent studies have attempted to come up with alternatives, such as looking at where in the body fat is distributed. For example, visceral fat — stored in the belly, around the organs — seems to be of particular concern when it comes to health.

So in summary, while BMI isn't totally useless, it's not a diagnostic tool, either. If you find your BMI number alarming, it could be a signal it's time to seek out medical help. — *Kristen V. Brown*

TOPLINE:

Compared with body mass index (BMI), waist-hip ratio (WHR) had the strongest and most consistent association with all-cause mortality and was the only measurement unaffected by BMI.

METHODOLOGY:

- Cohort study of incident deaths from the UK Biobank (2006-2022), including data from 22 centers across the United Kingdom.
- A total of 387,672 participants were divided into a discovery cohort (n = 337,078) and validation cohort (n = 50,594), with the latter consisting of 25,297 deaths and 2297 controls.