

Understanding Body Fat

The ideal percentage of body fat varies between each individual depending on various factors such as gender, body type, hereditary, age, activity levels and eating habits. People who are overweight generally develop a higher body fat percentage due to either a sedentary lifestyle or a regular consumption of more energy than the body requires, often though it is the combination of both these factors over time that allow the body fat percentage to push to high levels.

What is body fat percentage? It's simple enough. It's the amount of adipose tissue (body fat) we carry compared to our weight. A 160-pound person who is carrying 32 pounds of fat would be said to have 20 percent body fat. We all want to be working toward an ideal body fat percentage, staying within a range where we carry enough fat to feel and look healthy, but not so much that we develop the health issues associated with obesity, including hypertension, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and cancer.

Not all fat is bad. In fact, fat plays a crucial role in human physiology. Fat stores energy, regulates body temperature, cushions/insulates organs and builds cell membranes. People with extremely low levels of fat are at risk for immune system dysfunction and severe fatigue. Females with inadequate body fat will experience a disrupted menstrual cycle.

Numerous testing procedures have been scientifically used to estimate body fat percentage with varying degrees of accuracy. Tests vary by time commitment, ease of access, cost and accuracy. Skin fold measurement and bioelectrical impedance analysis are two common forms of body fat estimation.

General Body Fat Percentage Categories



Classification	Women (%fat)	Men (% fat)
Essential	9-11%	3-5%
Below Average/Athletes	12-19%	6-13%
General Fitness	20-24%	14-17%
Average/Acceptable	25-29%	18-24%
Obese (Level I & II)	30% +	25% +

Body fat percentage is only one aspect of your physical fitness and does not replace medical evaluation or advice. Although norm charts exist, fitness level is based on individual characteristics. It is important to remember that men and women should maintain a certain level of essential fat to avoid possible health problems. If you believe your body fat is too high or low, seek professional advice.

(Adapted from ACSM & ACE Fitness)