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Understanding Body Mass Index by [Ryan Smiths](#)

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Though doctors spout it and researchers write it all the time, patients have a hard time figuring out what BMI means. Even spelling it out doesn't mean much to the average person: Body Mass Index. Most know it has something to do with their weight. But can't a scale just tell us that answer?

For the average person, keeping track of his/her weight is far more important than trying to calculate a vague- sounding BMI. But this is popping up across the world, and being linked to disease risk more and more. And, just for the sake of its popularity, in spite of its limitations, it's important to know one's BMI.

So let's get down to what this thing is all about, once and for all. BMI is a calculation of your weight (in kilograms) divided by your height (in meters squared). Since the U.S. still uses the imperial system, it's easiest to figure out your BMI on a slew of online sources. Just type "BMI" in Google and see what happens. Find a BMI calculator such as the one on the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute's

web site that allows you to enter your weight and height in pounds and feet, which you are most certainly used to. It will automatically switch the values to metric.

While BMI shouldn't be considered the absolute word on your risk of disease due to your weight, it is one of three important cogs: the other two are your waist size and the percentage of body fat you are carrying. Two decades ago, officials started using the BMI system to track individuals who were at risk of major problems ranging from high blood pressure and diabetes to stroke and cancer.

In 1998, the National Institutes of Health issued obesity guidelines based on BMI scores: "normal" was between 18.5 and 24.9, while "overweight" was 25 to 29.9 and "obese" was 30 and higher. This had many experts puzzled because body fat and muscle mass are not distinguished. (For example, a bodybuilder could be over 30 and be technically obese.)

In truth, there are several other oddities about the BMI, including low numbers being deceptive and the fact that a high number doesn't automatically mean you are facing a slew of risk factors. (Because, for instance, exercise is an important variable.) BMI isn't the best way to assess body fat and its relative risk to your health, but it remains a surprisingly accepted way to gauge one's health. Why? Because it's extremely cheap and simple to calculate.

Just don't think that it's the be- all and end-all to calculating your weight in relation to your health.

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