

Are you obese?

As people grow older, it's common to add on "a few extra pounds." But when the pounds add up to more than 30% or your ideal body weight (**obesity**), the extra weight can put you at an increased risk for a number of serious health problems.

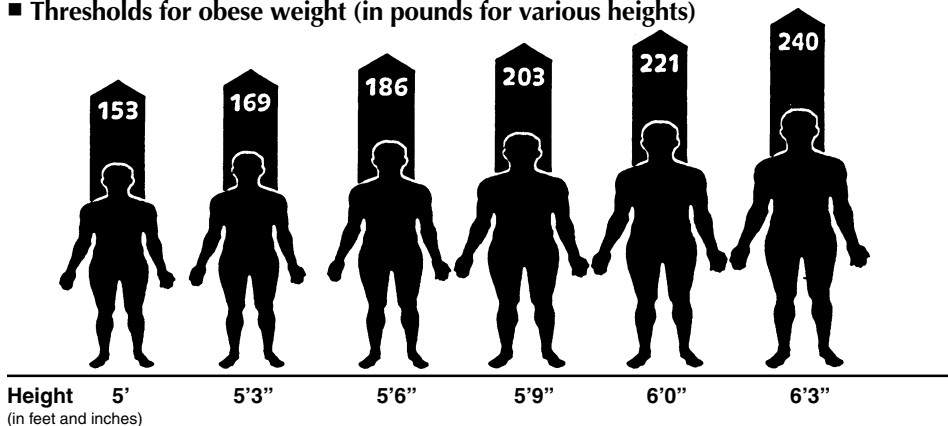
A study in the October 27, 1999, issue of *JAMA* shows that Americans are getting fatter and the obesity epidemic is spreading throughout the United States. The study, conducted from 1991 to 1998 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, shows that almost 1 in 5 American adults is now considered obese, compared to approximately 1 in 8 earlier in the decade.

WHAT CAUSES OBESITY?

In general terms, excess body weight and obesity occur when a person takes in more calories than he or she burns off through activity and exercise each day. Some of the excess calories are stored in the body as fat. However, genetic, environmental, psychological, and other factors are also known to contribute to obesity.

Obesity is measured by using a mathematical formula called a **body mass index (BMI)**—weight in kilograms divided by height in meters squared ($BMI = kg/m^2$). To convert, multiply your height in inches by 0.0254 to get meters, and multiply your weight in pounds by 0.45 to get kilograms. A BMI of 19 to 24.9 is considered a "normal" weight. A BMI of 25 to 29.9 is considered overweight, while 30 or above is considered obese.

■ Thresholds for obese weight (in pounds for various heights)



Source: National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases

Additional Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases Weight-control Information Network

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HEALTH CONSEQUENCES:

Being overweight and obese places you at increased risk for developing a number of serious health problems, including:

- **Heart disease and stroke** - The leading causes of death and disability for both men and women in the United States
- **Diabetes** - Type 2, or non-insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus
- **Cancer** - Increased risk of cancer of the uterus, gallbladder, cervix, ovary, breast, and colon in women; increased risk of cancer of the colon, rectum, and prostate in men
- **Sleep apnea** - Interrupted breathing during sleep
- **Osteoarthritis** - Wearing away of the joints, which often affects the knees, hips, and lower back.
- **Gallbladder disease** - Risk of gallbladder disease and gallstones increases as weight increases

TREATMENT:

Treatment methods for obesity can range widely depending on how obese a person is, the person's overall health and motivation to lose weight. Treatment can include a combination of diet, exercise, behavioral modifications, and some medications. In extreme cases, surgery may be recommended. The important first step you can take is to talk to your doctor about what may be the best options for you.

Eating a balanced diet, reducing total caloric intake, decreasing intake of dietary fat, and exercising regularly are some important ways to help reduce excess weight and to maintain a healthy weight. Try to accumulate at least 30 minutes of daily physical activity. These activities can include planned exercise (such as riding a bicycle, jogging, or taking a brisk walk) or daily household activities (such as raking leaves, gardening, playing actively with the kids).

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- **National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases Weight-control Information Network (WIN)**
800/WIN-8098 or www.niddk.nih.gov/health/nutrit/win.htm
- **American Dietetic Association**
800/366-1655 or www.eatright.org

INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, check out the AMA's web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm. Previous Patient Pages were published on weight management (January 20, 1999) and exercise (January 27, 1999).

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