

THE FALLACY OF THE BMI

The body mass index, or BMI, is a formula that calculates a person's general mass based on their height as compared to their weight. Everyone knows the BMI these days. It's how doctors, insurance companies and others calculate how over- or underweight a person might be.

But how much do you really know about the BMI? It turns out that it's not really a reliable indicator of obesity. In fact, NPR calls it "mathematical snake oil."



Adolphe Quetelet (left) created the formula in 1835. He was interested in discovering the most he could about man's ideal condition, both physically and mentally. However, he was interested in the big picture; he looked at populations, and acknowledged that these averages were not to be used to measure individuals.

"It is in this way that we propose studying the laws which relate to the human species; for, by examining them too closely, it becomes impossible to apprehend them correctly, and the observer sees only individual peculiarities, which are infinite.

I understand [natural limits] within which the human proportions may vary, not only without constituting deformities and monstrous aberrations from nature, but also without wounding the eye by want of harmony,"

-Quetelet, A Treatise on Man and the Development of his Faculties

uh... kind of problematic 19th Century way of saying "every body is different"



The BMI does not discriminate between fat, muscle, or bone. Someone who is overweight may have a high BMI, but so may a very lean athlete with a lot of muscle.

Kate Harding has put together a Flickr slideshow illustrating the fallacies of the BMI.

<https://tinyurl.com/BMI-illustrated>

so what's the big deal?

The BMI has real-life consequences

- Insurance companies used to (and perhaps they will again in the near future) be able to deny or raise premiums on coverage for those with a high BMI.
- High schoolers in California are quite literally tested on their BMI. In other words, California teens can fail a public school test because of a flawed mathematical formula. Their bodies are pass or fail. In this world where body image is a growing concern for teens, is this something we want to support?

SOURCES

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