

# 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" (1). Let's get into it.

*math, not medicine*

Adolphe Quetelet created the formula in 1835. He was not a doctor, but a mathematician, and 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 shouldn't 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" (2).

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

*okay, so what's the big deal?*

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. The BMI literally provides no actual information about an individual's health, but when medical providers follow the BMI indiscriminately, it often prevents people from accessing necessary medical care.

Quetelet only used white European men for his formula.

Even when the formula was updated in the 1970s, there was not a wide enough sample of various ethnicities to really determine accurate ranges for all bodies. This creates deficits in healthcare for people of different ethnicities and risks health and lives (3, 4).

*also! it's racist.*

*...and arbitrary*

In June of 1998, "Millions of Americans became 'fat' [overnight] -- even if they did not gain a pound," when the United States government changed the criteria for BMI categories (5) although the BMI has been in use since 1985 (6).

## SOURCES

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