

Body Fat Percentage: What's Your Number?

Written by Arizona Foothills Magazine

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People who care about their health and appearance will often say “I need to lose five pounds.” Or “twenty pounds.” Or any such number. But weight loss shouldn't be based on pounds. Instead, it should be based on body fat percentage.



How much of your body is fat?

For women age 20 to 40, the ideal body fat percentage is between 21 and 33%. For women age 40 to 60, it's 23-35%.

For men those same ages, the overall range drops to 8-22%. But women are genetically designed for [pregnancy](#) and nursing, which requires more breast tissue and more fat-storing enzymes. In fact, if a woman's body fat percentage falls too low, she'll stop menstruating...because Mother Nature assumes she's starving and won't be able to feed a child.

Why does the percentage matter?

If you're trying to lose weight, setting a goal in pounds could be a mistake. For example, say that Ana weighs 160 pounds and works out regularly, giving her more muscle mass than her non-exercising friend Zoe who also weighs 160.

Zoe's body fat percentage is 40, which means her lean body mass (LBM) weight from bones, blood, muscle and organ tissue takes up 96 pounds, while the remaining 64 pounds is fat. Since Ana's body fat percentage is 20, she has only 32 pounds of fat.

So if these friends decide to diet together and each of them loses 40 pounds, Zoe's health will improve. But Ana's body fat percentage will drop so low that she'll lose the essential fat she needs for storing energy, producing hormones, and staying warm in rooms with too much air conditioning.

How can you find your percentage?

Finding your body fat percentage is important before you set any weight-loss goals. There are several ways to calculate it, which vary in accuracy:

1. The DEXA or full-body X-ray scan is highly accurate and also expensive.

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2. Hydrostatic weighing is done underwater and is very accurate.
3. Skin-fold caliper measurement is accurate when done by a personal trainer or someone with experience, although you can't do it on yourself.
4. BIA scales or devices run a small electrical current through you when you step on them or hold them. Depending on which one you use and when you use it, there may be some variation in accuracy.
5. Tape measurement is remarkably accurate when done on your own, following the method used by the U.S. Navy. Just measure:
 - your height
 - the circumference of your waist (for men use the level of your navel)
 - your hips
 - your neck, slanting the tape measure so it angles below the larynx.

Enter those numbers into an online [body-fat-percentage calculator](#) and see how you score.

Once you know...

Finding your body fat percentage will help you decide if you need to build muscle, lose fat or a combination of each. With such a wide range of acceptable numbers, it's easier to make the right decision for yourself.

[Laurie Schnebly writes for the [North Phoenix Massage Envy Spa](#) located off the I-17 and Happy Valley Road. With a master's in counseling and 11 years as a therapist, she focuses on issues that affect daily life for people who want to improve their overall health. Take some time to commit to a better balance of health and wellness by scheduling a facial or massage at one of the [Phoenix Massage Envy](#) area clinics.]