Can you really be fit and fat?

When we think of fitness, we often think of super-slim models in tight yoga pants, or shirtless muscular guys lifting the heaviest weights. Of course, there is nothing wrong with these images, but what if you don't fit this mould? We ask an expert whether it's possible to be fit and fat at the same time.

The idea that skinny equals healthy is ingrained. And on the flip side, people often associate larger bodies with being inherently unhealthy.

Of course, it's important to look after your health by eating well and exercising, but what about those people who are just naturally bigger? While everyone can lose weight if they restrict their calorie intake enough, genetics plays a huge part in how easily people put on weight and how hard they find losing it. Research shows that two-thirds of Brits are on a diet "most of the time" but it can be easy to forget that we are all built differently. Are 'fat' and 'healthy' really mutually exclusive or is it possible to be fit and fat?

How obesity affects health

Unfortunately, the research is clear-cut: it's never healthy to be obese. Many studies show that, unsurprisingly, there is a clear link between being severely overweight and developing a risk of heart disease and type 2 diabetes. Losing weight if you're overweight certainly decreases the risk of problems such as a heart attack or stroke. But cardiologist Dr Yassir Javaid also thinks that it can be counterintuitive to solely focus on size when we think about health.

Other ways to reduce health risks

"There are many other ways to reduce your risk factors of an early death other than just losing weight. If you smoke, quitting is crucial. It is also important to reduce visceral fat (deep fat around your organs) - this lowers your risk of type 2 diabetes, improves your blood pressure and lowers bad cholesterol," he says.

So it seems that losing weight isn't always the only priority when it comes to maintaining a healthy body and heart. And whatever your size, there are other good choices you can also make to lead a healthy lifestyle.

How important is BMI?

Javaid explains that if your BMI puts you in the overweight rather than seriously obese category, it's not how much you weigh that's really important. Rather, it's where you carry that excess weight. .

"Body shape is probably more important than body weight," he says.

Visceral fat vs intra-abdominal fat
"Trying to reduce the amount of fat on the tummy is something to prioritise as this is a marker for having excessive fat around the organs (visceral fat), which is more dangerous than fat elsewhere."

Those with an 'apple-shaped' body are usually the ones with a higher risk of developing that visceral fat as they tend to carry it around their torso. However, if you are significantly obese then whatever your shape is you will likely have an excess of intra-abdominal fat. A healthy, varied diet full of fibre, protein and healthy fats will help to reduce this and improve your overall health.

If you're unsure as to what body type you fall under, then measuring your waist circumference or waist-to-hip ratio is a good place to start. Our handy tool will help you do this.

Exercise benefits everybody

With the rise of plus-size personal trainers like Louise Green (Big Fit Girl), the idea of a single perfect exercise body is slowly dying and giving credit to the idea that you can be fit and fat. It can still be quite daunting to some, however, particularly if they are new to exercise or aren't particularly comfortable in their own bodies.

Just know that nobody in the gym is there to look at you. Never be afraid to ask a member of staff for help on a few regular exercises, as they can help you reduce injury by practising proper form for your body.

Exercise is an integral part of maintaining a healthy lifestyle and fitness level, so whatever your size you should be making some effort to move your body , according to Javaid.

He says: "It is always better to be active, but being significantly overweight can compromise your breathing and put major stress on your joints (so avoid high-impact exercise if possible)."

There are so many different types of exercise nowadays and anything that gets your heart rate up is beneficial.

Focus on small, sustainable changes

Loving your body is easier said than done though, and a lot of us find focusing on the number on the scales triggers low self-esteem. So, instead of attempting to lose weight through a drastic, restrictive diet, why not try to focus on small, manageable changes? Aim for a healthy, balanced diet with frequent bouts of some type of physical activity that you enjoy.

Initiatives like the NHS's Active 10 campaign or Couch to 5K will provide you with plenty of guidance and motivation - perfect for starting and maintaining a fitness routine. If you're looking for something more social, then have a go at your local Parkrun. It's free!

And remember, mental and physical health should always be a priority, whatever your shape or size.

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