

- Weight loss

How much weight do you really need to lose? It might be a lot less than you think

The Witness · 11 Apr 2024 · 9 · NICK FULLER • Nick Fuller is the Charles Perkins Centre research programme leader, University of Sydney.

If one of your New Year's resolutions involved losing weight, it's likely you have contemplating what weightloss goal you should be working towards.

But type "setting a weight loss goal" into any online search engine and you'll likely be left with more questions than answers. The many weight-loss apps and calculators available will make setting this goal seem easy. They'll typically use a body mass index (BMI) calculator to confirm a "healthy" weight and provide a goal weight based on this range.

Your screen will fill with trim-looking influencers touting diets that will help you drop 10 kilos in a month, or adverts for diets, pills and exercise regimens promising to help you effortlessly lose weight. Most sales pitches will suggest you need to lose substantial amounts of weight to be healthy, making weight loss seem an impossible task. But the research shows you don't need to lose a lot of weight to achieve health benefits. We're a society fixated on numbers. So it's no surprise we use measurements and equations to score our weight. The most popular is BMI, a measure of our body weight-to-height ratio. BMI classifies bodies as underweight, normal (healthy) weight, overweight or obese, and can be a useful tool for weight and health screening.

But it shouldn't be used as the single measure of what it means to be a healthy weight. This is because it:

- fails to consider two critical factors related to body weight and health – body fat percentage and distribution; and
- it does not account for differences in body composition based on gender, ethnicity and age.

WHAT BENEFIT TO OUR HEALTH?

Losing just five percent to 10% of our body weight can significantly improve our health in four key ways.

REDUCING CHOLESTEROL

having too much low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol — also known as bad cholesterol — because carrying excess weight changes how our bodies produce and manage lipoproteins and triglycerides, another fat molecule we use for energy. Having too much bad cholesterol and high triglyceride levels is not good, narrowing our arteries and limiting blood flow, which increases the risk of heart disease, attack and stroke. But research shows improvements in total cholesterol, LDL cholesterol and triglyceride levels are evident with just a five-percent weight loss.

LOWERING BLOOD PRESSURE

Our blood pressure is considered high if it reads more than 140/90 on at least two occasions.

Excess weight is linked to high blood pressure in several ways, including changing how our sympathetic nervous system, blood vessels and hormones regulate our blood pressure.

Essentially, high blood pressure makes our heart and blood vessels work harder and less efficiently, damaging our arteries and increasing our risk of heart disease, heart attack and stroke. Like the improvements in cholesterol, a five-percent weight loss improves blood pressure. A meta-analysis of 25 trials on the influence of weight loss on blood pressure found every kilo of weight loss improved blood pressure by one point.

REDUCING RISK FOR DIABETES

Excess body weight is the primary manageable risk factor for type-two diabetes, particularly for people carrying a lot of visceral fat around the abdomen (belly fat).

Carrying this excess weight can cause fat cells to release pro-inflammatory chemicals that disrupt how our bodies regulate and use the insulin produced by our pancreas, leading to high blood sugar levels. Research shows that just seven percent weight loss reduces the risk of developing type-two diabetes by 58%.

REDUCING JOINT PAIN

Carrying excess weight can cause our joints to become inflamed and damaged, making us more prone to osteoarthritis. Observational studies show being overweight doubles a person's risk of developing osteoarthritis, while obesity increases the risk fourfold.

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