

# ***Body Composition***

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## ***What is it?***

Body composition refers to the constituents of your body - lean mass, fat mass, and water.

Scales weigh total body mass. What the scale does not tell you is whether that mass is fat, lean (which includes bone, ligaments, and muscle) or water. Your body composition is more important than your weight in determining fitness and health.

## ***Too High or Too Low?***

Excess fat may be partly genetic, but most commonly results from poor exercise and nutritional habits. If your percentage of fat is excessive you may want to make some lifestyle changes. Excess fat raises one's risk for heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and cancer. Excess fat stresses the cardio-vascular system and reduces the body's ability to work efficiently.



Elite athletes may have body fat percentages as low as 5% for men and 8% for women, but this, of course, is the exception and extremely low body fat can be very risky. In females, a low body fat percent can alter hormone levels, stopping menstrual periods and contributes to osteoporosis. In extreme cases, low body fat has contributed to organ failure, heart attack, and death.

All of us require stored body fat for fueling energy- if the body has too little fat, it will begin to break down muscle tissue in order to satisfy energy requirements.

## ***Ideal Lean Mass***

The lean mass percentage refers to the percentage of the total body weight that is made up of lean mass—bone, ligaments, and muscle). This percentage varies for men and women. *For men*, the ideal

percentage of lean body mass is between 82% and 90%. Less than 75% lean mass for men is considered obese. *For women*, the ideal percentage of lean mass is between 75% and 83%, with less than 65% lean mass considered obese.

## ***Measuring Composition***

Underwater weighing, available at some fitness centers, hospitals, and clinics, is considered the most accurate measurement tool. Since fat tissue is more buoyant than lean tissue, an over-fat person will actually weigh less underwater than will a leaner person. Underwater weighing is unrealistic for the average person because of convenience and expense.

Another tool for measuring body fat is a skin-fold caliper, which measures the fat below the skin's surface. Although it is less accurate than underwater weighing, for most people it is more convenient. Skin-fold tests are free to students enrolled at UW-Stevens Point. If you are interested in obtaining a skin-fold body composition assessment contact the Student Health Promotion Office in 004 Lower Level Allen Center.

## ***Maintenance***

For optimum health and fitness, it pays to maintain your body composition within the recommended norms. Regular exercise and a nutritional diet go hand-in-hand in maintaining a balanced body composition. Aerobic exercise—the kind that uses large muscle groups for an extended period of time—uses oxygen to burn fat for energy. A diet low in dietary fat and high in complex carbohydrates (whole grains and vegetables) can improve your body's energy reserves with a relatively low intake of calories.

