

THE WEIGHT OF HEALTH



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As of this article's creation in early March 2021, the top video when "healthy" is searched on TikTok is a weight loss video featuring a lemonade-like drink that is supposed to allow the viewer to lose 10 pounds in just a week. The second most popular video under the "health" hashtag features an exercise designed to deliver "a flat stomach and toned abs in just ten days." The #healthybody page is inundated with fitness and workout videos.

This doesn't mean that there are not creators promoting other healthy body types: Massive progress has been made in the past few years toward normalizing all bodies and recognizing different body types. However, there is definitely still a bias in society toward the thinner, more toned figures.

When searching for similar hashtags on Instagram, the results were even less varied. The top posts were either diet recipes or pictures of extremely toned bodies. Forbes's list of the top seven highest earning TikTok accounts includes names like Addison Rae, Loren Grey and Michael Lee. What do all of these in-demand influencers have in common? A toned physique.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to look a certain way and, in general, being physically active is good for the body and mind. On the other hand, exercise and dieting—like anything else—can become toxic if obsessed over or taken up in unhealthy amounts.

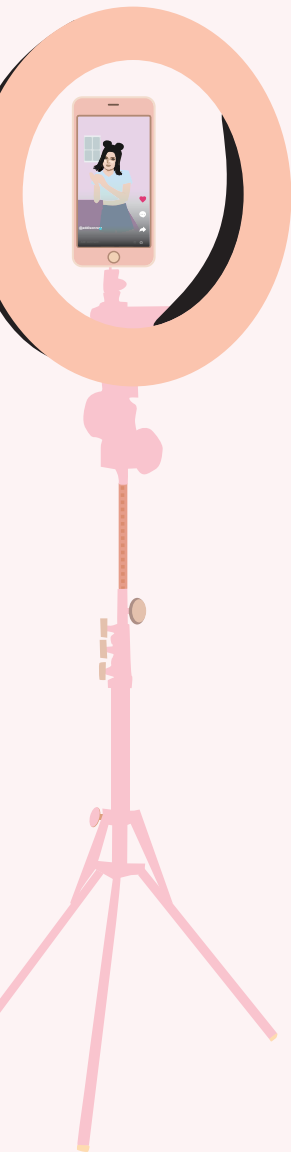
The media perpetually portrays a limited number of body shapes and types as "healthy." Although "attractive," "healthy," "skinny" and "fit" are often and incorrectly used interchangeably by social and conventional media, it is important to focus on their version of healthy—and how it differs from reality.

"Attractive" is an adjective that is subjective and defined in distinct ways by every individual. Health is a little easier to define, although there are different paths to get there and it looks different on different people. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary lists a number of definitions for the words "health" and "healthy," including "the condition of being sound in body, mind or spirit," "free from disease" and "not displaying clinical signs of disease or infection."

The first definition draws attention to the fact that health is not a purely physical attribute; mental and physical health are closely related and equally important. Notice how none of these definitions say anything about what a healthy person should look like. None of them mention visible muscles, a small waist or a slight figure. While people with these three characteristics can be healthy, being healthy does not mandate having these characteristics. Health does not just have one appearance; it can come in as many shapes, sizes and colors as there are people.

"The Truth about Fat," an episode of NOVA that aired on PBS, sheds some light on the importance of body fat and the way it is misunderstood in regard to its relationship with health. The segment broke down how body fat contributes to a person's overall health, as well as why an absence of fat is not ideal for a healthy body.

Many Sumo wrestlers would be classified as obese due to their body mass indexes (BMI); however, they do not suffer from conditions normally associated with their size. NOVA found that this is due to all the exercise that their career demands. Their active lifestyles cause their fat to sit under their skin, away from their core of muscles and vital organs. In their case, although they have large amounts of body fat, they are completely healthy physically. They are a great example of how impossible it is to judge the health of a person based on their appearance, while serving as a contrasting—but more accurate—view from how we usually view the relationship between size and health.



The episode goes on to explain, with the help of doctors and expert researchers, that not having enough body fat leads to osteoporosis, where weakened bones face higher tendencies of breakage, as well as reproductive troubles. Body fat cushions bones and joints, and keeps them protected; without it, bones have more stress on them and will become frail. But the human brain also knows how much fat is in its body. This affects reproductive health because if the amount is too low, the brain will shut down reproductive capabilities in order to conserve fuel. The episode examined how in hunter-gatherer communities—the way all societies used to be—body fat protects humans who do not know where their next meal will come from. The extra layer is insurance against hunger and ensures a longer life.

Fat gets a lot of hate that it does not deserve; it is a misunderstood, but essential, part of health. One huge reason why there is so much misinformation surrounding the relationship of weight to health is due to bias and a lack of education. Schools teach kids, to some degree, which foods are healthy for them and what choices are best for their well-being. However, kids develop an image of health in their heads, and are led to believe that eating the recommended foods will make them look like it. There is no instruction of what healthy looks like physically as far as body shape, so they are left to assume that the slim figures they see on magazine covers or in movies are their goal.

Health classes in schools do encourage activity, but usually with the goal of losing fat or maintaining weight. They do not teach kids the importance of fat in their bodies or the fact that health cannot be measured at a glance. It does not help that many parents and even doctors are misinformed as well. Doctors refer to the BMI chart to determine whether a patient's size is underweight, "healthy," overweight or obese. But the chart is simply a mathematical ratio of weight to height; it is not a measure of health. It is unable to measure muscle composition, pregnancy or disease: all things that affect weight.

Dr. Herbert Shmerling, a senior faculty editor for Harvard Health Publishing, states that many people who have a high or low BMI are healthy and, on the other end, many with a "healthy" BMI are unhealthy. He also shares that "more than half of those considered overweight by BMI had a healthy "cardiometabolic profile," including a normal blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar." BMI can be a helpful tool, but it is not a measure of health and should not be relied on to indicate whether a person's weight is acceptable.

Society's portrayal of fat or being "overweight" as something completely separate from, and even the enemy of, health is not accurate and it is detrimental, especially to young people. It encourages many people with perfectly healthy bodies to think that they do not look the way they should or that they are not healthy enough. Body image issues contribute to mental health, relationships and daily life.

There are videos on TikTok with hundreds of thousands of likes where teens show pictures of the tiny, curvy or toned bodies that they think they are supposed to look like and cite them as

the reason for their insecurities. Seeing one body type highly promoted as the ideal, and finding that it does not match their own, is hurtful and alienating to many young people. It causes confidence to plummet and insecurities to soar, and contributes to body dysmorphia, eating disorders and anxiety.

Luckily, there are many people working to combat this idea that a flat stomach is a necessary attribute for a healthy body. Health at Every Size (HAES) is a movement created by author Lindo Bacon. They have published several books about the misunderstanding of the relationship between weight and health. Their website describes the HAES movement as a "paradigm that is committed to advancing social justice and respecting the diversity of human bodies (including, explicitly, larger bodies)."

HAES offers a community of people who support healthy bodies of all sizes, as well as a list of resources including organizations, blogs and programs of their own that are oriented toward health and body acceptance.

Mik Zazon, known as @mikkzazon on TikTok, devotes her videos to promoting the acceptance and validity of all bodies, especially "tummies." Kenny Ethan Jones, @kennyanjones on Instagram, uses his platform to share how his relationship with his body has improved over time as a transgender man. These social media figures are just a couple examples—many others are working to encourage love and respect for the human body in all of its beautiful forms.

Finding and following someone you like who represents and validates your specific body type is helpful. It is extremely important to remember that social media—TikTok especially—tends to trap us in our own little bubble of what it thinks we want to see. Be conscious of the social media atmosphere you find yourself in and the ways that it affects you.

There are many unique, healthy and beautiful body types, but the fact that any one of them may engage in extreme eating, dieting and exercise in an effort to measure up to what they think is "healthy" is actually sad. Despite the misunderstanding surrounding the topic, body fat is not the enemy: it protects us and is part of a healthy body. It is impossible to tell from their appearance how healthy a person is.

Education needs to improve in regard to the relationship between health and weight, particularly in the understanding of BMI. It is not an accurate tool for measuring health; it is simply a mathematical formula that can provide a ratio of height to weight. Society should be more focused on strength and function in the human body than on how they look. Humans come in all shapes, sizes and colors—similar to flowers. People don't tell the flowers that they are less deserving of acceptance because they are big or small; people deserve to see themselves the same way. You deserve to see yourself that way.

