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Is it *Really* O.K. to be Overweight?

Finally, a health headline Americans could love: *It's O.K. to be Overweight!* News outlets all over the country reported the happy headline with glee – the subtext being “eat what you want, it doesn’t matter!” But big research studies don’t fit nicely into 15 second sound bites or one sentence headlines. The researchers’ findings – and what the findings really mean for Americans – were much more complex than the news stories let on.

What the researchers were interested in finding out was: how many deaths in the United States are related to being overweight or obese? While that seems like a simple question, finding the answer is actually quite difficult because other factors, such as smoking and age, can come into play. The researchers used information that put people into categories based on body mass index (BMI) and then compared overweight and underweight people to healthy weight people. Take a look at what the researchers actually found:

- People over the age of 60 who were underweight (a BMI under 18.5) had a higher risk of death than healthy weight people (a BMI of 18.5 to 24).
- People age 25 to 69 who were extremely obese (a BMI of 35 or over) had a higher risk of death than healthy weight people.
- People who were in the overweight categories (a BMI of 25 to 29) did not have any greater risk of death than healthy weight people.
- People who were in the lower obese category (a BMI of 30 to 34) also did not have any greater risk of death than healthy weight people.

These last two findings are the ones that got the most media attention. Do they show that being overweight or even obese isn’t bad for you? Not necessarily. The researchers studied death – not health. In other words, just because heavier people don’t seem to have a greater risk of death than healthy weight people doesn’t mean that they are healthy. Overweight and obese people are more likely to have high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease. But deaths from cardiovascular disease have been falling – not because people are healthier – but because we have good medications for treating high cholesterol and high blood pressure. And what about quality of life? Again, the researchers measured death not quality of life so the findings can be somewhat deceiving.

So how do you keep all of this in perspective? Studies have shown that you can be healthy and overweight – if you are fit. Talk to your doctor or a registered dietitian about your cholesterol, your blood pressure, and your eating and exercise habits to help you decide if your weight is healthy for you.

For more information on body mass index, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/bmi/calc-bmi.htm>

Flegal KM, Graubard BI, Williamson DF, Gail MH. Excess deaths associated with underweight, overweight, and obesity. *JAMA*. 2005;293:1861-1867.