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## **FIT IS IT**

I am occasionally asked **which is more important, *fitness or fatness***? The short answer is that physical fitness is more important than how much you weigh.

### ***Forget Fat vs. Thin - Remember Fit vs. Unfit***

Multiple studies have shown that in general it is better to be aerobically fit and a little on the heavy side than it is to have a normal body weight and be unable to pass a basic aerobic fitness test. Additionally, contrary to popular notion, thin does not necessarily mean healthy. Fitness is the more important measure to worry about.

### **What is *BMI*?**

The long answer is a little more complex, but worth explaining to clear up some common misunderstandings. This first issue is how we define “overweight” or “obese”. The most common initial measure is body mass index, or BMI, for short. As a general rule for adults, a number more than 25 is considered to be overweight and more than 30 is considered to be obese. However, this measure can be thrown off by muscle mass and how your weight is distributed. So, someone with a BMI more than 25 and normal waistline (generally less than 35 inches in women or less than 40 inches in men) may be just fine.



### **The “*At Risk*” Body Fat**

The body fat that puts us most at risk is the fat distributed around our middle, especially on the inside of your abdomen where it’s hard to see but still affects your waistline. For kids the definition of obesity is a little more complicated and based on a percentile score that requires a calculator. Many parents are not aware of their kid’s weight category, so it’s good to ask at your

child's medical checkup or ask the school nurse to see how your child measures up.

### **BMI, Diabetes, and Heart Disease**

Another good question when we say at risk is, at risk for what? It turns out that when we look at the fitness vs. fatness debate, as long as your BMI is less than 35 and you can pass a fitness test, the risk for heart disease and death is much lower in fit/obese people than unfit/normal weight people. However, that's not true for Type 2 Diabetes. Even after correcting for fitness, folks who are obese have a higher risk for developing diabetes.

### **How To Define "Fit" for Kids**

The next question is, what counts as physically fit? In kids, physical fitness is often assessed annually during their PE class using either a timed 1 mile run or a test called the PACER where kids run back and forth across the gym with a timer playing audible beeps at progressively shorter intervals. It gets harder as the test goes on, and there are defined targets for different ages and genders. Lincoln Public Schools has students run the PACER test on all kids from 4th to 8th grade, so you can ask your child's PE teacher how they are doing on this test. This is important because not only is this test an important test of your child's health, repeated studies have shown that students who pass this test are more likely to pass Nebraska's state tests on math, reading, science, and writing.



### **How To Define "Fit" for Adults**



For adults, the fitness testing is a little more complicated. In the medical setting this involves a stress test on a treadmill, but there are less expensive ways to test. The medical version uses the term METS (metabolic equivalents) where 1 is the energy you use doing nothing, like sitting on your couch and watching TV. Higher levels of effort are multiples of that, so for example climbing a set of stairs is 7 METS, or 7 times the energy you use sitting still. One of the major thresholds for being fit enough to have a long life expectancy (even if you are overweight or obese based on your BMI) is 10 METS, which is equivalent to jogging at a 10 minute mile pace. If you can do this, your long-term health will likely be very good. If you can't run, another threshold you can use is calculation of your VO<sub>2</sub> max which some exercise equipment can tell you (e.g., an elliptical trainer or recumbent bike). The VO<sub>2</sub> max equivalent of 10 METS is about 35, so if your VO<sub>2</sub> max is more than 35, you are likely in pretty good shape.

So in summary, **fitness is more important than fatness**. If you or your child can't get to a "normal" BMI, don't worry so much as long as you can meet the above mentioned fitness targets.



Dr. Bob Rauner is the Executive Director of **Partnership for A Healthy Lincoln**, a local nonprofit dedicated to improving community health, wellness, and fitness. Partnership for a Healthy Lincoln works to improve wellness policies, conduct health research, and collaborate with community partners to promote healthy nutrition, increase fitness, and decrease obesity-related chronic diseases in our city and county. For more information visit [www.healthylincoln.org](http://www.healthylincoln.org)