What should you do if your body mass index (BMI) is raised?

What is body mass index?
Health professionals measure your body mass index (BMI) to see if your weight is in proportion to your height.

We calculate your BMI in the following way, which then gives us a number:

Weight in kilograms (Kg) ÷ by height in meters squared (m²)

This number tells us if your health is at risk, due to being either underweight or overweight.

What do the numbers mean?
- A BMI of 18.5 or below is considered underweight
- A BMI of 18.5 to 24.9 is considered an ideal weight
- A BMI of 25 to 29.9 is considered overweight
- A BMI of 30 or above is considered obese

In adults of Asian origin, a BMI over 23 is classed as overweight due to the higher risk of developing diabetes and coronary heart disease at a lower BMI.

What are the risks of being overweight?
There is a strong link between excess weight and the risks of developing diabetes. If you have a BMI of 30, you are five to ten times as likely to develop diabetes compared to someone of healthy weight. At a BMI of 35, the risk is about 40 times more. In addition to diabetes, risks of high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke and certain cancers are all markedly increased. People who are overweight or obese also risk arthritis of the knees and hips, breathing problems and women risk reduced fertility and a lower chance of having a healthy baby if they do fall pregnant.

Is BMI always reliable?
Due to muscle weighing more than fat, adults with a very athletic build could fall into the overweight or very overweight categories, so BMI in athletic people is not accurate. Similarly as you get older, BMI may underestimate your risk of being overweight, because a greater proportion of body weight will be fat rather than muscle.
We know that where you carry your weight may also determine the risks of you being overweight. If you put weight on around your middle (apple-shaped) then you are much more likely to develop diabetes and heart problems than if you put on weight around your thighs (pear-shaped).

Special tables are needed to assess children’s BMI since as they grow, the normal values change. Doctors now have these charts readily available – just like those they use for checking the height of children.

What should I do now I know my BMI is high?

Think about how you live your life. Do you eat healthy foods or is your diet one of sugary or fatty snacks, irregular meals, or larger portions than you really need? It might be worth keeping a diary of everything you eat and drink for a fortnight and then review your diet. Having breakfast, eating five portions of fruit and vegetables a day and having no more than the recommended levels of alcohol in your diet would be a good start to a healthy diet. If you need help then you could ask your doctor to make an appointment to see the practice nurse or community dietitian.

What about exercise?

At least 30 minutes of moderate exercise a day is required to maintain your health and nearer one hour a day to control your weight, especially after weight loss. A simple pedometer may be a useful tool to check if you are walking 10,000 steps per day which is recommended.

People who make these changes are often able to reduce their weight by 5 to 10%, which is enough to halve their risks of most obesity-related disease complications.

If you need help over and above this simple starting approach, you might feel like joining a self-help group like Weight Watchers or Slimming World. Alternatively, your GP may be able to refer you into your local weight management pathway.
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