

The Good, The Bad, and the Skinny on Fat

An Alternative View of a New Public Health Paradigm

In the January 13, 2003 issue of *The New Republic* an article entitled *The Weighting Game* by Paul F. Campos examines the mathematical formula that the U.S. government uses to determine if someone is overweight or obese. This formula gives what is known as the Body Mass Index (BMI).

Campos, who is a law professor at University of Colorado School of Law claims that there is no medical basis for the government's policy to place fat in the same category of public health hazards such as smoking and drug abuse. He points out that according to the BMI formula, fully three-quarters of National Football League running backs are obese (*the thin, running guys* —Ed). He not only questions that being BMI fat is a health risk, he also challenges the idea that being fat makes people sick.

Campos says that widely circulating research claiming that obesity contributes to 300,000 American deaths per year does not control for possible confounding variables such as sedentary behavior, eating junk food, and the effects of chronic dieting. This research, reported in *JAMA*, also found that subjects whose BMI weight was ideal, had the same mortality risk as those the BMI categorized as obese. A National Center for Health Statistics and Cornell University project he references, analyzed data from previous studies involving more than 600,000 subjects and concluded that, for nonsmoking

men, the lowest mortality rate was found among those considered overweight by BMI standards. For women the results were more dramatic. Campos also states that claims of increased health risks between weight groups are usually based on miniscule differences.

The Weighting Game is a short, readable, but nevertheless, encyclopedic description of research supporting Campos's argument. He includes a section on research conducted at the Cooper Institute in Dallas. Stephen Blair, its director, claims that moderate levels of physical activity radically lower rates of premature death regardless of BMI. In other words, according to Blair, if you are "fat and active" you "have nothing to worry about."

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Campos also cites *The Harvard Alumni Study*, which found that male alumni who had gained the most weight since college, and also expended at least 2,000 calories per week in physical activity, (*actual physical activity not just thinking about physical activity* —Ed.) had the lowest mortality rate of any other group in the study. Campos also cites University of Virginia Professor Glenn

Gaesser's claim that 75 percent of obesity studies between 1945 and 1995 conclude that weight has no effect on health.

In the U.S., the weight-loss industry largely funds research on obesity, and according to Laura Fraser, author of *False Hopes and Fat Profits in the Diet Industry*, diet and pharmaceutical companies greatly influence most of it. Campos criticizes Surgeon General C. Everett Koop for publicizing the Body Mass Index and falling under the spell of the diet industry. He concludes that a rational public health policy would emphasize not to smoke, not to be an alcoholic or drug addict, and not to be sedentary. Campos provides credible sources for each of his arguments. He covers the medical issue of chronic dieting and also discusses how our cultural proclivities support the paradigm that fat is bad. Two books of interest are *Big Fat Lies: The Truth about Your Weight and Your Health* by Glenn A. Gaesser and *The Obesity Myth* by Paul F. Campos and Paul Ernsberger.

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