

what the scales miss

You've probably stepped onto the scales, relying on them telling you if you're at a healthy weight. This can be frustrating, so understanding what the scales are telling you will help you to keep the information they give you in perspective.

the difference between fat and muscle

Scales simply measure your total body weight in kilograms. They don't measure how many of those kilograms are muscle, bones, blood and fat.

Focusing on the number on the scales is problematic because you don't know how many kilos are fat and how many are muscle.

You may have heard that "muscle weighs more than fat". That's not true - a kilogram of muscle weighs the same as a kilogram of fat - one kilogram!

Fat and muscle differ in an important way - muscle is much denser than fat. Imagine muscle is like a brick and fat is like a cotton ball. It takes far more cotton balls than bricks to make up one kilogram. So a kilogram of fat takes up more space in your body than a kilogram of muscle.

Exercise physiologists call the ratio of fat to muscle your body composition or body fat percentage.

making changes

If you start a program of moderate to vigorous aerobic exercise for 20 to 30 minutes, three to four days per week, plus strength training two to three days per week and combine this with sensible eating, research suggests you could potentially lose 0.25 - 0.5kg of body fat per week.

Your fitness lifestyle could help you lose 6kg of fat over the next three months. In addition, your strength training program could help you gain about 1.5kg of lean muscle - a very positive change.

Using the scale as your only reference point, you might be tempted to think your active lifestyle isn't working very well. You'd only see a 4.5kg weight loss but you'd have made truly positive changes to your health. Due to fat's lower density, the 6kg loss would be more evident as smaller measurements around your stomach, hips and thighs.

Muscle tissue not only helps you become stronger, making daily activities easier, it expends calories all day long, even when you are at rest. Over the course of a year, a few added kilograms of muscle can help you burn thousands of additional calories.

getting real about weight

Your body weight can fluctuate by a few kilograms over the course of a day due to the amount of water in your body, a big meal, or hormonal changes in women. If you feel the need to check the scales, make sure you do it under the same conditions; day, time and prior to eating. However, measuring changes in body fat and the way your clothes fit are far better indicators of your progress towards improved health.

further information:

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