

Fat or built? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

Many of my friends tell me that I look like a football player, because I have a big body and my body swings side to side when I'm walking. I'm very happy that my friends say that about me even though I rarely play football and never have the fantasy of being a superstar quarterback. Maybe my friends just don't want to say the truth about me — that I am fat. Too fat for my age to be more specific. I am 5'6" tall and weigh 170 pounds. Maybe I do look strong like a football player for I usually work out once in a full moon, or maybe I am just plain old obese. Alice, can you solve this dilemma of mine, am I fat or just big and strong?

Sincerely,
The fat football player

Answer

Dear The fat football player,

Thanks for punting your question over here! Body composition and image are complicated topics, and your friends' comments can make it even more confusing. Ultimately, what's key to your health is maintaining a balanced lifestyle through nutrition, sleep, and regular physical activity. If you'd like more objective measures of your weight, you may want to look into tools such as the Body Mass Index (BMI) and waist circumference calculations (keep reading for more on those). Both are used to indicate body fat composition, but to provide a more informed glimpse of overall health, these are best used in conjunction with other measures, such as tests for blood pressure, cholesterol levels, etc., and a discussion with your health care provider. Beyond indicators of health, it may be worth it to further investigate what's behind your own beliefs about your reflection.

A bit more information on how to calculate BMI: It's a ratio of weight to height, but online [calculators](#) ^[2] are helpful tools. Simply plug in your height and weight, and the calculator will output your BMI. According to this index, a BMI of:

- 18.5 to 24.9 is considered to be in the range of healthy weight
- 25 to 29.9 is considered overweight

- 30 or higher indicates obesity
- 40 or higher indicates extreme obesity

List adapted from [Body Composition Tests](#) [3] from the American Heart Association.

Keep in mind that the BMI may be misleading because someone who is muscular or athletic may have a higher BMI because muscle is more dense than fat.

Another way of calculating body fat distribution is to measure your waist circumference (in inches) in relation to your BMI. According to this measure, in general, a person assigned male at birth with a BMI of 25 or more would aim for a waist circumference of less than 40 inches, while individuals assigned female at birth with a BMI of 25 or more would aim for a waist circumference of less than 35 inches. This measure doesn't take into account the height of the person. You may find it helpful to talk about these different measures of body composition with your health care provider to learn more about your specific build. These assessments are general tools that can give you an idea of where your body may stand, but it may not tell the complete story. For example, an athlete with a lot of muscle mass may fall into the overweight category, even though they don't have as much body fat and have other positive indicators of health.

In addition, it might be helpful to reflect upon why you're thinking about your friends' comments now. It seems as though you're concerned about your weight and your friends' comments have made you question how you feel about yourself. Are you worried about your health? Do their comments conflict with the ways in which you view your body? If you took some time to think about it, how do you feel about your body right now? If your friends hadn't mentioned anything about how you look or your body type, would that change how you feel? What other factors influence how you feel about your body? Your family and other loved ones? Images you see in the media? Cultural or societal standards of attractiveness? Medical advice from a health care provider? It may be worth it to consider these factors and how much they impact your evaluation of your own body. If this is something that you continue to grapple with, you might find it helpful to discuss these feelings with a loved one or a mental health professional. Working through your own perceptions may help you feel better — and maintain a healthy lifestyle. In the meantime, check out the [Body Image](#) [4] and [Fitness](#) [5] sections of the [Go Ask Alice! Nutrition & Physical Activity](#) [6] archives.

Take care,

Alice!

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Related questions

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Links

[1] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/fat-or-built-0>

[2] http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/HealthyLiving/WeightManagement/BodyMassIndex/Body-Mass-Index-In-Adults-BMI-Calculator-for-Adults_UCM_307849_Article.jsp#bmiswf

[3] http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/HealthyLiving/WeightManagement/BodyMassIndex/What-are-Body-Composition-Tests_UCM_305883_Article.jsp

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