



How Much Body Fat? It Depends...

... on performance

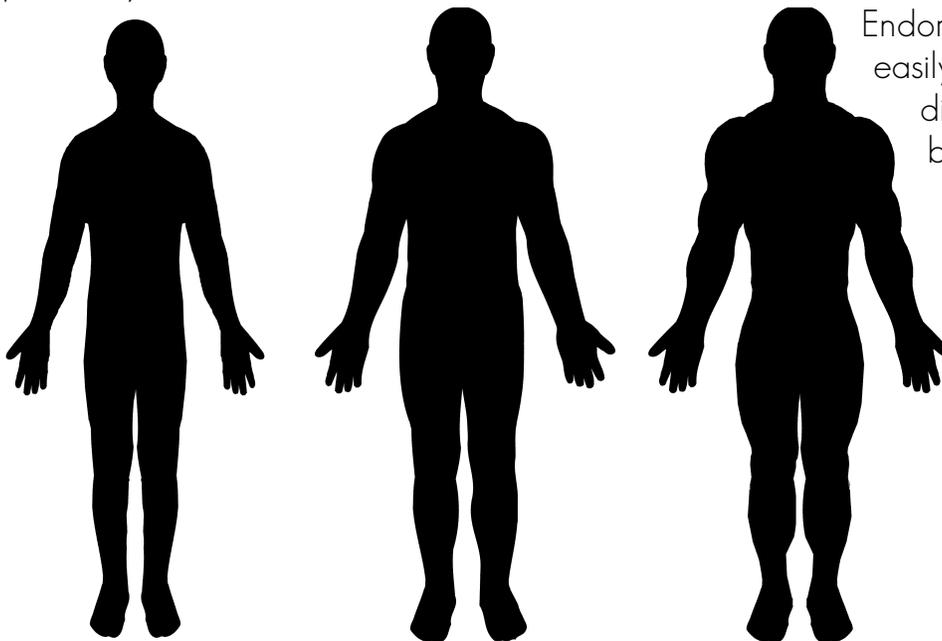
No one percentage of body fat is right for everyone, even teammates or rivals in competition. Body fat varies from person to person and often changes during the season compared to off-season. The average body fat for 18-24 year olds is 20-25% for women and 13-16% for men. The average body fat percent of athletes sometimes runs lower because of genetics and training, but body fat levels of successful athletes vary a lot. A professional hockey team averaged 10%, with a range from 8% to 15%. And the percent body fat of an elite female volleyball team ranged from 13% to 26%, averaging 19%. The right level for you is where you feel and perform your best.

...on genetics

Genetics has a lot to do with how much fat we store, and everything to do with where we store it. You can't change your body's tendency to store more or less body fat in certain places-thighs, stomach, or hips. And you can't change your body type. Bodies come in three basic shapes: ectomorph, mesomorph or endomorph.

Ectomorphs tend to be lean and slightly muscular. They usually don't carry excess body fat. Mesomorphs are naturally muscular and strong, with a long torso and full chest. Mesomorphs can increase muscle size quickly. Endomorphs have a stocky build, with wide chest and hips and short bones. Endomorphs tend to gain weight easily and body fat loss is more difficult than it is for the other body types.

continued on page two



...on the sport

Body fat affects some sports more than others. For example, athletes in sports with light weight classes like rowing, wrestling and judo often maintain a low body fat to make the weight class.

Gymnasts and figure skaters strive to maintain low body fat for agility and appearance. However, many positions in many sports do not require a low body fat, and a low body fat can actually be detrimental. Being heavier can help athletes avoid getting pushed around on the field or floor, and propel speed in sports like skiing.

...on maturity

Full-term babies are born with body fat, lots of it, and it is critical to support growth. Body fat generally decreases during childhood, until puberty. Then, as females go through puberty they gain an average of 35 pounds, and males gain about 45 pounds. Girls tend to deposit more of this weight as fat tissue, whereas boys usually gain more muscle than fat. A woman's natural increase in body fat is an essential part of maturing.

Bottom line

How much body fat should athletes have? No chart holds the answer. Performance, not percent, tells athletes whether they have the right level of body fat.

...on health

Too little body fat is a health problem because body fat has many important functions. For one, it stores energy that the body uses during training, studying, watching TV and sleeping. The layer of fat under the skin insulates the body and helps maintain body temperature. Fat tissue surrounds vital organs and protects them from shock and injury. It enables nerve transmission and is a vital part of every cell.

Having several of the following symptoms might indicate that an athlete's body fat is too low:

- Chronically restricts calories;
- Loses or doesn't gain strength and endurance;
- Gets sick or injured easily;
- Feels tired, even with enough sleep;
- Feels cold often, even when others don't;
- Has irregular or absent periods.

