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Health myths: Being a bit overweight shortens life

26 August 2013 by [Caroline Williams](#)
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Let's be clear – being seriously obese is bad for your health. A body mass index of over 40 increases the risk of type 2 diabetes, heart disease and certain cancers and increases the risk of dying from any cause by up to 29 per cent. This is not a health myth.

But carrying just a few extra pounds, far from being a one-way ticket to an early grave, seems to deter the grim reaper, according to a recent review of nearly a hundred studies involving nearly 3 million people. The review, led by Katherine Flegal of the US Centers for Disease Control in Hyattsville, Maryland, reported earlier this year that being "overweight" – defined as having a body mass index (BMI) of 25 to 29 – seems to have a protective effect, with a 6 per cent reduction in death risk compared with people with a BMI of between 18.5 and 25. Those with BMIs over 35, however, have a higher risk (*JAMA*, vol 309, p 71).

It isn't clear why being overweight might protect against an early death. Perhaps carrying a few extra pounds in reserve helps the body fight off illness or infection. Perhaps overweight people are more likely to receive medical attention. Or perhaps some of those counted as "normal" had lost weight due to serious illnesses.

Whatever the reason, Flegal says her finding is not a green light to eat all the pies. Overweight people might be more likely to develop diseases that affect the quality of life, for instance. Even so, it seems that a little bit of flab may not be the crime against health it has always been made out to be.

This article appeared in print under the headline "5 Being a bit overweight means you will die sooner"

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From issue [2931](#) of New Scientist magazine, page 36.

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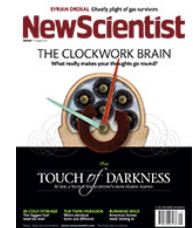
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When should you start worrying? (Image: Bryan Mullennix/Getty)

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Metabolism

Thu Aug 22 20:36:18 BST 2013 by **Graham**

Perhaps people with a lower BMI have a higher metabolism, which could increase the wear on their bodies causing a shorter life-span.

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Bogus Bmi

Fri Aug 23 01:43:59 BST 2013 by **J B**

BMI is a very flawed measure. Try calculating it for some professional athletes and you will see why.

I'm a big fan of Rugby and in particular the world champion All Blacks.

Dan Carter is one of the finest athletes the game has ever produced. He is a fly-half which means he has to be fast, agile, and strong. He's 178cm tall and 95kg = BMI 29.7.

So despite being a top-level athlete in his prime, his BMI says he is overweight, bordering on obese.

As far as Rugby players go, Carter is not huge. All Black captain Richie McCaw has a BMI of 30.9 (obese), and prop Charlie Faumuina has a BMI of 38.4 (severely obese)!

I fall into a different category...

I'm not in as good a shape as I was when I was younger. With a BMI of 23.1 I am considered normal weight, whereas a few years back when I was working out regularly, my BMI was 26.2, which meant I was overweight.

And therein lies the problem with BMI. It only considers mass, and does not distinguish hard lean muscle, from soft flabby fat.

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Bogus Bmi

Fri Aug 23 07:33:54 BST 2013 by **Eric Kvaalen**

McCaw certainly doesn't look obese: [\(long URL - click here\)](#)

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16:05 30 August 2013
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Low Calorie Conflict

Mon Aug 26 20:42:25 BST 2013 by **Damon**

This seems to conflict with the reports that low calorie or low protein diets extending life expectancy. Can anyone comment on this?

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Low Calorie Conflict

Tue Aug 27 09:07:26 BST 2013 by **Eric Kvaalen**

Well, people who are "normal weight" are NOT doing caloric restriction, so they're not getting the benefits of it. If you do caloric restriction, you'll end up underweight -- which brings a lot of problems by itself.

What I do (and I don't know for sure how effective it is) is alternate day caloric restriction. One day I eat a low number of calories, the next day I eat as much as I feel like. But very few people do that, so it doesn't show up in any statistics.

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