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## **What the Scale Doesn't Tell You**

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September, sometimes called the "first quarter" is a fresh start after a summer of fun in the sun, holidays and BBQ's. It's the beginning of a new school term and many people are anxious to get back to or begin new fitness routines.

How do you start back into your fitness routine after taking the summer off? How do you measure results and success? In your eagerness to succeed are you jumping on the scale once even twice a day?

From time to time we all step on a scale to measure our body weight. But relying on the scale to tell us if we are a healthy body weight can be deceiving. Understanding what the scale does and does not tell us can help keep the scale's information in perspective.

A scale simply measures our total body weight in pounds (or kilograms). It does not measure our "Body Composition" - how many of those pounds are muscle, bones, blood, etc. and how many are fat. We want to know how many of those pounds are from muscle - which we want more of and how many are from fat. You may have heard people commenting that "muscle weighs more than fat." This is not true. A pound of muscle weighs the same as a pound of fat: one pound. However, muscle is much denser than fat. Think of it this way: Muscle is like a brick, fat on the other hand is like cotton balls. A pound of fat takes up more space on your body than a pound of muscle.

Judging ourselves solely by the scale weight can be misleading. For example, if a sedentary person decided to start a fitness program that includes moderate to vigorous aerobic exercise for 20 to 30 minutes three to four days per week, and strength training two to three days per week (check with a fitness professional for guidelines on how to develop a safe and effective program) and accompanies this workout schedule with a sensible, adequate caloric intake, research suggests you could potentially lose one to two pounds of body fat per week.

This new fitness lifestyle could result in a conservative loss, of say, 10 pounds of fat in the next three months. In addition the strength training program could help gain about three pounds of lean muscle weight, a very positive change. Using the scale as the only reference point, you might be tempted to think your new lifestyle wasn't working very well, because you'd see only a seven- pound weight loss. Rest assured - these are truly positive changes.

Additional muscle tissue not only helps you become stronger, making daily activities easier to accomplish; it also elevates the metabolism by using fat for fuel, expending

calories all day long, even when we are at rest. Over the course of a year, a few added pounds of muscle can help us burn thousands of additional calories.

Because of fat's low density, we would see the 10 pound loss as smaller circumference measurements around the stomach, hips and thighs. That is why paying attention to the way our clothes fit is generally considered a better way to assess our progress than focusing on the scale. As your shape changes, so will your health. Your stress level will be reduced and you will feel calm and relaxed. Your sleep will improve. You will have more energy, will feel better about yourself and you will be ready to accept new challenges.

Keep in mind that body weight can fluctuate by several pounds over the course of a day. This is especially true if you exercise fairly vigorously. The fluctuation is due to changes in the amount of water in your body. If you weigh yourself before and after an exercise session, you might find you've lost a few pounds. It's just water loss. Likewise, if you weigh yourself right after a big meal, the scale might show you've gained weight. Additionally, women often show weight fluctuations in relation to hormonal changes. Checking the scale no more than once every week or two is usually best.

Other excellent ways to accurately track changes in your exercise progress is measuring percent body fat by the use of skin fold calipers or the circumference measurement technique. These are common methods that can be performed by a qualified fitness professional.

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