Thinner is not always better

By ACSH Staff — January 2, 2013

At a time when many individuals are making new year’s resolutions to lose weight, a new report [1] suggests that thinner may not always be better.

A meta-analysis, appearing in the Journal of the American Medical Association, analyzed almost 100 studies and 3 million individuals. Researchers found that those with a body mass index within the overweight range (25-29.9) had less risk of dying than those individuals who fall into the normal range (18.5-24.9), but that overall obesity and higher levels of obesity were associated with a higher all-cause risk of death. People who are overweight but not obese, therefore, may not need to worry as much about their weight unless they have other indicators of poor health related to blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol.

According to Dr. George Blackburn, associate director of Harvard Medical School’s nutrition division, the report suggests that B.M.I, a ratio of height to weight, should not be the only indicator of healthy weight. Furthermore, according to Dr. Kamyar Kalantar-Zadeh, professor of medicine and public health at the University of California, Irvine, fat per se is not as bad as we thought. What is bad is a type of fat that is inside your belly. Another surprising aspect of the study is that people 65 and over who had higher BMIs, well into the range of severe obesity, had no greater mortality risk.

But death is not the only thing people have to worry about. According to Dr. Samuel Klein, director of the Center for Human Nutrition at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, even if being overweight doesn’t increase your risk of dying, it does increase your risk of having diabetes or other conditions.

ACSH’s Dr. Ruth Kava noted While the results of the study may seem surprising, it’s important to understand that BMI itself is only an approximation of fatness. Other factors, such as the body distribution of fat and activity levels play a role in the accuracy of this estimation. For more on obesity, read ACSH’s publication, Obesity and Its Health Effects. [2]