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The skinny-fat problem: Why lack of muscle tone is killing you



Are you skinny-fat?

Skinny might be a coveted body shape but being thin doesn't always equal healthy. In fact, you can be "skinny-fat," which means that even though you're thin, your body is still holding onto a lot of fat. We're looking at what it means to be skinny-fat and why muscle tone is so important.

We asked **Franci Cohen, fitness trainer, certified nutritionist and exercise physiologist in New York City** for her insight into the importance of muscle tone and what it means to be skinny-fat.

What does it mean to be skinny-fat?

The term "skinny fat" refers to someone who appears thin in size, but their body is mostly fat and has very little muscle, **Cohen** explains. She says that terms such as "skinny-fat" or "obese anorexic" are not contradictory terms. "They are synonymous terms that mean the person looks skinny, but because they have absolutely no muscle mass on their body, the only thing keeping them alive is a thin fat layer covering their body."

Skinny doesn't mean healthy

We often associate being thin with being healthy, but that isn't always true. Believe it or not, you can actually be classified as overweight even if you look ultra-skinny. "The World Health Organization defines obesity as someone who has a body mass index of 30 or greater. So someone can starve until they become frail and skinny, but because what's left on their fragile skinny body is just skin and fat, they can still be defined as obese," affirms **Cohen**. "In a case like this, skinny is definitely not healthy."

Start strength training now

You might think that simply going to the gym and logging your 45 minutes on the elliptical is enough, but skipping strength training is a mistake. "By ignoring strength training, you are robbing both your bones and muscles of the opportunity to strengthen and grow. Strength training offers a plethora of benefits, including improved glucose control, healthy heart tissue, weight maintenance, increased bone density, arthritis relief and more," explains **Cohen**. In addition, she notes that muscle at rest burns more calories than fat, so strength training to build muscle can aid in weight loss efforts as well. "I'm not saying to pump iron and become a giant body builder, but light weights and high reps can give you the health benefits you desire without the bulkiness that you don't."

The importance of muscle tone

Adding strength training to your fitness routine isn't just about avoiding the skinny-fat trap or looking amazing in a bikini. Maintaining muscle tone is important at every age. "Muscles, like everything else in the human body, degrade over time. As we age we must take extra care of our bodies," **Cohen** warns. "Being proactive and taking care of ourselves from an early age, before muscles start degenerating, can help maintain the integrity of our muscles for a longer period of time," she explains. As we get older, especially toward middle age and onward, the struggle to keep muscle tone increases even more. **Cohen** explains that this is due to a condition known as sarcopenia, which is a degenerative process associated with aging. "Loss of muscle tone is often more significant in the lower extremities, leading to a decreased ability to walk and balance yourself, which then leads to a greater risk of falls and other injuries," she says. "When you lose muscle, your strength and energy levels also decrease, as does metabolism." This muscle loss can only be combated by strength training throughout your life, which will help maintain the strong, healthy muscles you need to function properly.

What to do if you are skinny-fat

The first thing Cohen does when faced with a client who could be "skinny-fat" (after ruling out other physical or psychological disorders responsible for the "skinny-fat" condition) is to inquire about the client's lifestyle with regard to physical activity. Next she puts him or her on a program that incorporates both cardio and strength training. Additionally, she may request the client undergo a test called hypodensitometry, which accurately calculates a person's bone density, body fat and muscle. "This would give us an accurate starting point, to which we can refer back later on, as the client continues to train and, hopefully, enhance both muscle tone and bone density, while reducing fat content in the body."

In terms of how much strength training you should be doing, each person's needs vary and should always be assessed on a case-by-case basis, but there are some standards to go by. "Most recognized fitness organizations recommend an average of 20 to 30 minutes of strength training two to three times a week," **Cohen** advises.