

# Starting Strength

## Age and Bodyfat

by

Mark Rippetoe

I read the comments on these articles, you know. “Rip’s a fat guy. Don’t believe anything he says about fitness.” “Fit people don’t look like Rip’s fat ass. Run awaaaaay!!” As I sit here finishing the last of an unclaimed birthday cake from Kroger, listening to Chicago’s “Free Form Guitar” on repeat, this harshness brings a tear to my bloodshot piggish little eyes. People are so hateful sometimes. Usually they’re just stupid and ignorant, and that can be interpreted as hateful.

But not by me, Nosiree. I know how people are, and they just haven’t thought clearly about several important aspects of human existence. First, I’m not a model, although my rugged good looks qualify me for such work (I was kidding about the birthday cake and the eyes). I’m a coach, a lecturer, and an author. I’m paid for what I know, not how I look. Tom Landry didn’t look like Randy White, but that didn’t keep him from being effective as Randy’s coach. My job is not to have abs, and it’s not even to show you how to get them. My job is to teach you how to get strong with barbell training, and why you should, and I’m quite good at it.

I have been doing this since 1978, and I’ve forgotten more about strength and conditioning than many coaches will ever have an opportunity to learn. But I’m old, I’ve accumulated a lot of injuries, I can’t train as hard as I used to, I like to eat and drink, and I have a little belly. That doesn’t keep me from being an effective coach, lecturer, and author. And it’s amazing to me that I actually have to explain this to people who haven’t thought about what a coach does. They’re not hateful, just slow.

This is important too: I’m no longer primarily concerned with my appearance, and many of you in this particular audience aren’t either. Vanity is a luxury we don’t have time for – a costly, unnecessary luxury for truly mature individuals who are content to be merely strong, healthy, and physically competent. I’m not interested in being a fat slob, and as long as I’m training and thinking clearly about what I eat and drink, I won’t be. My primary interest now is that my continued physical existence be such that I’m still having *fun*.

Ladies and gentlemen, that doesn’t require “abs.”

Visible abdominal muscles are fashionable in Western society these days, but in some cultures visible abs mean poverty and privation, which is never fashionable anywhere among those who must endure it. Strength and health are not dependent on low bodyfat levels, which occur as a possibly fortunate genetic predisposition among some people. Varying levels of bodyfat distribution are largely determined by both genetics and environment. Some people are fatter than other people, some people

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get fat easier than other people, and some people lose fat easier than other people. Losing fat that has been there a while requires that things be done differently, and just exactly *how* differently things must be done varies with the individual too. For people who naturally carry higher levels of bodyfat, attempts at radical bodyfat reduction can be expensive in terms of the psychological and physiological costs necessary for dropping below what for them would be normal bodyfat levels.

The Body Mass Index (BMI) is a way of measuring body composition. It is a ratio of the person's bodyweight and their height. Since it does not discriminate between muscle mass and fat mass, BMI is a very poor indicator of body composition in people with a lot of muscle, but for epidemiology in the general population, it works pretty well. "Normal" is considered to be 18.5 to 25, the "obese" range starts at 30, and the "underweight" range starts below 18.5. If you train with weights, you've had problems with misinterpretation of the BMI before, but then again, you're not the problem here.

"Very severe obesity" – a BMI of 40 or above – is a bad idea, and not just for the superficial reasons fashion dictates. Morbid obesity is the result of less-than-perfect genetics coupled with profound derangement regarding diet and physical activity. Even people with less-than-perfect genetics can be perfectly healthy at higher bodyfat levels if they eat and drink with a reasonable degree of self-restraint and exercise at the levels of intensity necessary to stay strong and conditioned. The vast majority of the *morbidly* obese got that way by sitting on their asses and eating like fools – you know, the kind of people who live on the couch when they're not at Kroger salvaging unclaimed birthday cakes.

But just as bad as morbid obesity is being severely underweight. In the absence of a wasting disease condition, severely underweight people also have a derangement in diet and physical activity that keeps them at an abnormally low bodyweight. They lack normal bodyfat stores, but they also lack normal muscle mass, organ mass, and bone mass. They may well have visible abs – very fashionable, I suppose.

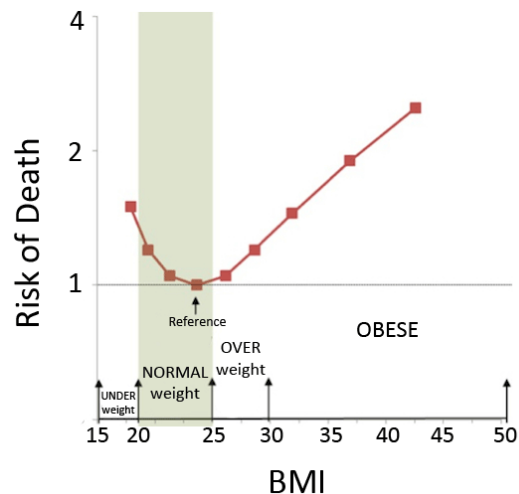
The mortality line is not a hockey stick, folks. It is a "U," slightly shifted towards the right.

In fact, people of normal BMI have the same mortality rate as "moderately obese" people. According to the studies of all-cause mortality, mild obesity is protective, and both severely underweight and morbid obesity are, uh, *not* protective.

We all know that enormous fat people enjoy a lower quality of life and tend to drop dead early. So do the marvelously slim individuals whom everyone seems to idolize as Pictures of Health. I'm not making this up – Google is your friend here, even if I am not – thin, frail people have problems with their daily existence and drop dead early, too. The shocking truth is that fatter people carry more muscle mass, and that muscle mass and strength are protective.

Here are several interesting facts: gaining strength requires muscular growth. Muscular growth requires a caloric surplus. Muscular growth requires an increase in bodyweight, unless you're overweight when you start training. *Bodyweight* gain always involves an increase in both lean body mass (LBM) and bodyfat, and weight loss always involves a loss in both fat and LBM. Training skews the ratio of LBM/fat upward, and protects against the loss of as much LBM.

This is very important: stronger people live longer, no matter what the other variables might be. In studies of all-cause mortality, stronger people have a lower mortality rate at any age. Any profound



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loss of LBM is highly correlated with mortality. Heavier people tend to be stronger. Heavier people carry more muscle mass, and more muscle mass correlates positively with strength, even if they are fatter. Even morbidly obese people are stronger, though the process of getting morbidly obese by sitting on your ass and eating cake tends to offset the benefits. Underweight people tend to be weaker, and weaker is the opposite of stronger in terms of all-cause mortality. Underweight people tend to lose bone mass as well, because they don't do the things that keep themselves stronger and heavier, which keep their bones dense. Less-dense bone predisposes an individual to fractures. Pelvic fractures are very, *very*, **very** bad.

These are the facts. Therefore, if health and physical capacity are your primary concerns, abs are not a leading indicator – in fact, they may be a lagging indicator, depending on how they got there. Younger people who train very hard and watch their diets carefully will usually show visible abdominal musculature. But many athletes performing at a high level do not; low bodyfat levels are not an advantage in every sport, and some sports are so strenuous that the diet necessary to show visible abs does not allow for recovery from the work.

As we age and changes take place in our hormonal milieu, the physiological environment necessary for the growth of muscle and the loss of fat erodes. When you were young, you swam with the current; when you were fully mature, you swam in the lake; now that you're older, you're swimming upstream. I'm as sorry about that as anybody, but getting older simply makes staying skinny and muscular harder to do. It certainly doesn't make it impossible, especially if you haven't already done it. Older people benefit more from strength training than younger people do, but it is harder to make progress than when you're younger, so you'd better hurry.

This is why I say that a little pot belly on a 60-year-old gym owner who can still deadlift 500 pounds is not necessarily a bad thing. So lighten up a little, okay? And while you're at it, get an accurate grasp of your own situation. Things may not be as they seem.

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