Comparisons of BMI, Body Fat Percentage, and Abdominal Girth as Obesity Indexes for College Students

Zi H. Zou, Oliver W. A. Wilson, Zack Papalia, Melissa Bopp, FACSM, Christopher M. Bopp. Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

Obesity can be categorized using a number of methods, such as body mass index (BMI), abdominal girth (AG), and body fat percentage (BF%). Each of these methods have their strengths and weaknesses. PURPOSE: To compare rates of overweight and obesity as determined by BMI, AG, and BF% and to describe the associations among each method. METHODS: 5943 college students completed an objective fitness assessment, where height, weight, AG, and BF%, using BIA, were assessed. Correlation and chi-square tests for independence analyses examined the relationships between the variables and differences in obesity classification. RESULTS: The majority of participants identified as men (60.5%). Significant differences were found in the categorization of those meeting obesity criteria by technique. In men and women, respectively, 47.6% and 44.1%, of individuals categorized as normal based on %BF were categorized as overweight or obese by BMI (Men: $\chi^2=1547$, p<0.001; Women: $\chi^2=1127$, p<0.001). In men and women, respectively, 48.3% and 24.0% of individuals classified as normal based on AG were categorized as overweight or obese using BMI (Men: $\chi^2=1274$, p<0.001; Women: $\chi^2=996$, p<0.001). Comparing AG and BF%, 25.1% of men and 18.6% of women categorized as normal based on AG were categorized as overweight or obese using BF% (Men: $\chi^2=1412$, p<0.001; Women: $\chi^2=421$, p<0.001). Significant correlations were found between BMI and BF% for men ($r=0.775$, p<0.001) and women ($r=0.849$, p<0.001); BMI and AG for men ($r=0.868$, p<0.001) and women ($r=0.858$, p<0.001); and, BF% and AG for men ($r=0.749$, p<0.001) and women ($r=0.767$, p<0.001) CONCLUSION: Significant associations between BMI, AG, and BF% were found for both sexes. BMI demonstrated an increased rate of misclassification compared to AG and %BF. Further research is needed in this, and other, populations due to the potential consequences of misclassification of obesity.