

WHEN LOOKS CAN BE DECEIVING

HOW DOES ONE FIT INTO A SWEET SIZE TWO YET STILL BE CONSIDERED FATTER THAN SOMEONE WHO WEARS A SIZE SIX? THAT'S RIGHT – YOU ARE MOST PROBABLY 'SKINNY FAT' AND DON'T EVEN KNOW IT! **TAMMY CHAN** SPEAKS TO FOUR DIFFERENT EXPERTS TO GET THE LOW-DOWN ON WHY SOMETIMES, LOOKING SKINNY MIGHT ACTUALLY BE WORSE THAN BEING OVERWEIGHT.

I used to think that as long as I could fit into my XS-sized clothes, I don't have to worry about my weight and health. Which was why I panicked when I came across a 'skinny fat' article by *TIME Magazine* that read "on the outside, they look incredibly healthy, but on the inside they're a wreck. They never eat vegetables, love steak and haven't exercised since eighth grade gym class – and yet they're still thin." With my jaw dropped and eyes wide open, I whispered, "That's me" and mentally made a note to get my body checked!

As the months passed, I eventually forgot about the commitment I made to myself until the topic was brought up during our monthly editorial meeting for this issue. With the old fear now back in my mind thanks to this assignment, I promised myself once again that I would finally get to the bottom of whether I'm considered to be 'skinny fat'. But first, what does it really mean?

BREAKING DOWN THE TERM

As the word suggests, 'skinny fat' is a non-scientific term used to describe people who appear to be skinny and visually healthy but in reality, suffer from similar medical issues as an obese person. According to Dr Kalaiselvam Thevandran, Consultant Internal Medicine and Nephrology at Columbia Asia Hospital Klang, while many clinical phrases have been coined to describe it over the years, i.e. Thin Outside Fat Inside (TOFI), Metabolically-Obese Normal-Weight (MONW), Normal Weight Obesity (NWO) and Sarcopenic Obesity (SO), they all carry the same meaning. "It describes lean individuals

with a dangerously high percentage of body fat compared to lean muscle mass. They look lean and healthy, but when we check them up, they have high levels of hidden body fat (aka visceral fat) and inflammation – making them appear thin and flabby at the same time," he explains.

ACCORDING TO OUR EXPERTS, YOU MIGHT BE 'SKINNY FAT' IF YOU:

- Are always on fad diets or low-calorie diets and rarely exercise
- Experience high sedentary time with minimal physical activities
- Feel dizzy or light-headed after a mild exercise
- Get tired easily and have a low stamina
- Have weak muscles
- Are diabetic or pre-diabetic
- Have a high level of bad cholesterol and triglyceride and a low level of good cholesterol (HDL)
- Experience headaches (that could be due to undiagnosed hypertension if the blood pressure is too high)

DID YOU KNOW?

Weight is not the main measurement to use when determining the presence of skinny fat.

UNDERSTANDING THE SYMPTOMS

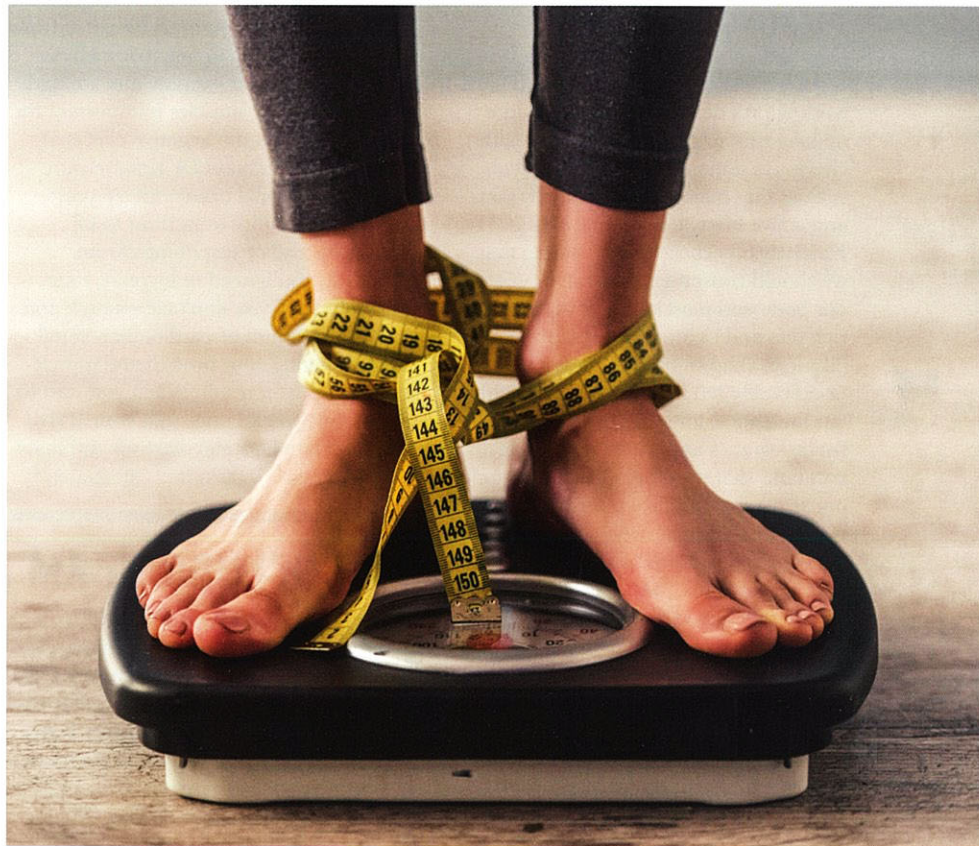
Wenisa Ng, personal trainer and owner of Activ Studio in Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur, points out that many Asian girls are obsessed with looking thin and as a result, they'd sometimes neglect their health. "Many women would rather go on a diet than exercise. So although they may look slim, when they step on the body composition machine, they'll be shocked to find out the amount of body fat present in their body. It's a medical condition because it's not subcutaneous fat that sits around the skin. Those are fats that are within your organs known as visceral fat, which will put a strain on your organs in the long run," she says.

To have a clearer idea on where you stand and which category you fall under in terms of being 'skinny fat', Dr Radhiah Zainal Rashid, Medical Officer at Pantai Hospital Cheras recommends going for regular blood tests to get your cholesterol, triglyceride and glucose levels checked. Pantai Integrated Rehab Centre's Clinical Exercise Physiologist, Zain Bin Abd Halim suggests that we can also measure our composition using high-tech machines such as BoPod, DEXA (Dual Energy XRay Absorptiometry), BIA (Body Impedance Analysis) and Hydrodensitometry as they tend to produce near-to-accurate readings.

WHERE TO FIND THEM:

Health screening centres, fitness gyms and slimming centres.

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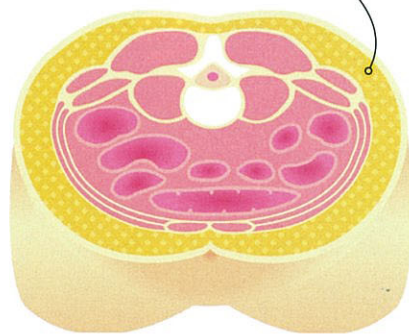


RECOGNISING THE DANGERS

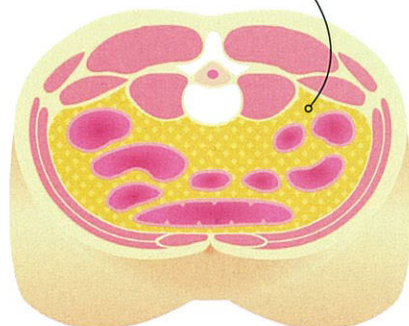
When asked whether being 'skinny fat' poses any danger to our health, Dr Radhiah reveals that it can be very dangerous, saying, "You might think that you're in the safe zone, but truth be told, the accumulation of fat, cholesterol and plasma sugar, and an inactive lifestyle will increase your risk of getting diabetes and cardiovascular diseases such as a heart attack and stroke." Zain further elaborates that because fat tissues are pro-inflammatory agents, excessive visceral fat deposited at vital organs such as the liver and pancreas will result in several non-communicable diseases (NCDs) like cancer, dyslipidemia and hypertension.

Dr Kalaiselvam follows up by sharing some info he found from a study in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA). The study showed that one in four skinny people have pre-diabetes and are 'metabolically obese'. Furthermore, if it's found that you're 'skinny fat' at the time you're diagnosed with diabetes, then your risk of death is double that of someone who is an overweight diabetic. Yikes!

Subcutaneous fat



Visceral fat



TREATING THE ISSUE

Combating 'skinny fat' is possible. It might require consistency, dedication and hard work but it's definitely doable. Besides making sure to get your general health check-ups done annually, Dr Radhiah stresses that maintaining a healthy diet and active lifestyle is also important. Dr Kalaiselvam echoes this by stating that we should consume foods that nourish our body and muscles, i.e. a vegetable-rich diet and clean sources of protein (like lean chicken breast, salmon and occasionally red meat) as well as healthy fats (avocados, nuts and olive oil) and fruits, legumes and whole grains. He also mentions that we should learn to manage our stress since clinical research analysis reveals that chronic stress could cause fat to accumulate around our internal organs, which is harmful. "Make meditation a daily practice, take time to unplug from your devices, try yoga and practice deep breathing when you are faced with difficult situations. The most important thing to remember is that your health is more internal than external," he says.

One consistent tip that I got from all four experts was to exercise regularly.

"Being skinny fat, you need to switch from a sedentary lifestyle to one that includes both cardiovascular exercise and strength training. Building muscles is important for you to scale back the negative effects of being skinny fat," says Dr Kalaiselvam. Wenisa, a personal trainer for 20 years, also advises that it's important to lift weights instead of just doing cardio. "Basically, you'll need to increase your metabolism. If you don't eat enough and do a high amount of cardio, then you'll end up wasting your protein and muscle mass (which you need). When you start to lift weights, you'll notice that your BMR (Basal Metabolic Rate) picks up and that's when you start to burn fat – the higher it

is, the more fat you burn. So if you start lifting weights five times a week, in six months your body will turn into a fat-burning machine. Start eating clean, talk to a fitness professional or dietician, have a plan and stick to it. Start your exercise routine and don't be afraid to try weights. However, be sure that it's heavy enough to make a difference. Don't just swing your arms around for fun. Keeping that in mind, also remember to not overdo your exercises. Our bodies perform really well in the first 45 minutes of any workout. Anything more and mistakes are bound to happen."

CONCLUSION: AM I 'SKINNY FAT'?

After my chat with Wenisa, I had the chance to have a go on the InBody analyzer machine at her studio. It was interesting to see how I could get detailed information of my lean and fat analysis just by standing on a scanning machine. Good news: I do not fall under the 'skinny fat' category as my visceral fat level is within the suggested range. Bad news: I'm lacking in muscles (9kg to be exact). I guess I know what I'll need to do now then!

