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The DoD and Body Composition

The Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) and subordinate Military Service body composition policies have historically sought to assess servicemembers' health and fitness to help ensure force readiness and a professional appearance. However, [body composition policies](#) have often employed rough measurement methods that may be biased and/or inaccurate.

New policies must add safeguards. They should also be assessed to ensure they align with current research and data and that servicemembers who are fit to fight aren't unfairly penalized.

Background

Until recently, Department of Defense (DoD) policies such as those setting body composition standards have not been routinely assessed for disparate impacts on women and people of color. Further, body composition policies and measurement methods have lagged scientific research and understanding of body composition, particularly body composition of athletes, including women and people of color.

- Body composition policies historically used measures such as the Body Mass Index (BMI) to screen servicemembers for health, which was misleading. BMI was developed on an unrepresentative population; women and people of color were [often overlooked or not included](#) when tests were designed. Further, BMI is intended as a tool to assess trends and allow comparisons at the population level, not [as a sole indicator of health](#).
- Body composition research also found that the tape and waist circumference methods employed as recently as 2025 don't accurately reflect fitness for different body types, [particularly in women and certain racial groups](#).
- Body composition policies have historically focused on [weight, thin-ness, and military appearance](#), capturing a bias for thinner bodies rather than a holistic focus on health and fitness for diverse body types. This ideal of thinness does not align with [research](#) into [body composition, athletic performance](#), and [injuries](#).
- Restricting intake to comply with body composition standards may cause [low energy availability \(LEA\)](#), which can [raise the risk of injury and limit physical and mental performance](#), risking readiness.
- Finally, otherwise physically fit servicemembers may perform more effectively and with fewer injuries at moderately higher levels of body composition, not lower, so a high performer could fail tape tests. There is also [little evidence](#) that body composition correlates directly with combat success.
 - This has been observed in successful Ranger-qualified women and female Marines in combat arms training. Research shows women may also [lose less lean muscle mass](#) than men in extended physical trials (e.g., Ranger School).

Recent Changes

In recent years, DoD has begun to recognize that older measurement methods and tools are biased against women and some [racial groups](#). Further, research has [highlighted](#) how biases and



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[associated policies](#) have [potentially contributed](#) to [disordered eating behaviors and eating disorders among servicemembers](#), particularly women and people of color.

By 2024, OSD and the Services had begun to make incremental changes, moving away from BMI screening and the tape test and exploring the use of more accurate body composition assessment options such as the [DEXA scan, BIA, and others](#). Further, the Services implemented [exemptions](#) or expanded [standards](#) for those who achieve high fitness test scores.

New Changes under Secretary Hegseth

However, in September 2025, Defense Secretary Hegseth halted these efforts and announced a new OSD body composition policy that the Services would be required to implement, one centered around the Waist-to-Height Ratio (WtHR). Hegseth also went on the record [criticizing “fat” servicemembers](#) and has done so repeatedly.

These actions are not promising for *four main reasons*.

First, while [WtHR](#) is appropriate for measuring cardiometabolic risks associated with hypertension and diabetes, **WtHR is not designed to measure [cardiovascular or muscular fitness](#)**.

Second, policy implementation is still being determined but **carries many of the measurement error concerns that were associated with the older – [and more problematic – tape test](#)**. Further, while the Marine Corps is permitting backup body composition measurements via [Bioelectrical Impedance Analysis \(BIA\)](#), which may help mitigate any measurement error or biases introduced through WtHR tape measurement, the [Army is not permitting any backup methods](#) at all.

Third, previous **exemptions or expanded standards for high fitness performers have been cut**. Under previous iterations of body composition policies, members who could perform well on semiannual fitness tests could receive, depending on scores, an exemption to body composition assessment or a higher body fat ceiling. While the Marine Corps is still permitting exceptions, the [Army makes no such allowances](#) in its published program.

Finally, this change **unravels years of progress and may exacerbate disordered eating and eating disorder behaviors**. Servicemembers have historically faced [greater risk of disordered eating and eating disorders](#). Requiring a stricter, “thinner” body composition standard (and having a Secretary who reinforces biases against heavier servicemembers) while simultaneously demanding more rigorous physical performance may increase the risk of [injuries, overtraining, and eating disorders](#) among servicemembers—particularly women and people of color.

What is needed

While implementation remains in flux, these body composition policy changes may carry negative implications – particularly for diverse populations – and require caution and revisions to ensure negative implications are mitigated.

First, minimize harm from new policy implication:



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- Reinstate fitness-based exemptions. Removing existing exemptions could negatively impact fit women and men across the services and prioritizes appearance over actual fitness.
- Allow alternate testing. Measurement error from WtHR tape use can carry career implications. Backup testing methods allow servicemembers a backup should taping errors or biased implementation falsely flag them for failing the body composition assessment.

Next, continue the forward progress that started over the past decade.

- Continue research. Progress toward better alignment of body composition and fitness assessments with existing research on diverse athletes should be continued, rather than stopped with this new policy change.
- Ground standards in science. Research and DoD experience has shown that women and men in physically demanding specialties, including combat career fields, may require additional muscle mass and fuel to perform occupational tasks effectively. Body composition standards should reflect the need for servicemembers to perform at high levels of fitness. In addition, linking body composition and fitness results directly to promotions and evaluations risks disproportionate attrition of women and minorities, compounding historical inequities.
- Study the impact of disordered eating on readiness. These stresses – discriminatory statements from top leaders, the need to perform at high levels, and the direct link from body composition to career progression and promotions – encourage disordered eating and eating disorder behaviors. DoD should examine eating disorder and disordered eating behaviors and how these may impact readiness. This research was proposed earlier but has not been pursued under this administration.

Conclusion

Imposing stricter body composition metrics based on biased measurement methods and expectations (particularly if exemptions for high performers and alternative measurement methods are removed) could lead to higher injury rates, increased eating disorders and disordered eating behaviors, lower retention, and reduced promotion outcomes for women—especially those in operational or physically intensive career fields.

Without modernization and flexibility, these measures may undermine readiness by forcing out strong, capable personnel based on unreliable assessment methods.

Anonymous, Marine Corps veteran

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July 17, 2026