



Santa is larger than life but his job keeps him fit

Six-year-old Shawn Jun asked us about Santa's health because he'd heard that being fat is bad for health and Santa is not exactly thin. He was concerned about Santa's well-being because Christmas wouldn't be the same without the jolly fellow around.

To answer Shawn's question, we decided to take a quick trip to the North Pole. Fortunately for us, Santa was kind enough to set aside a few minutes for a "Health Options" interview.

Health Options: This week's British Medical Journal indicated that Santa might be a questionable role model for today's children. Among other things, the article proposed that Santa should go on a health kick and lose some weight. What do ...

...Santa: Excuse me for interrupting, but I am an avid reader of medical journals and I read that article. I got a hearty laugh out of their starved and wasted version of me on a treadmill as the way I should look. They called it the "public healthy Santa" and claim it would be a better role model. But I believe the question is, Role model for whom? For budding Santa hopefuls?

There is a biological role for body fat, especially in a climate like the North Pole, and I believe there can be health at every size. I come from a genetic background of big, strong people, and I will never look thin.

My doctor says I have a BMI (body mass index) of 35. That puts me in the obese category. But, when they made further measurements to estimate my body composition, it turned out that I have about 20 percent body fat. That's not only a reasonably healthy level, but a drop from the 25 percent fat I had five years ago.

I'm a big guy and I'll never be a sprinter, but I have more muscle than fat. It comes in very handy for carrying my big bag of toys.

Health Options: So, it sounds like you consider yourself to be healthy.

Santa: Yes! I've outlived several of my doctors! Ho, ho, ho ... No one knows my exact age, but let's just say that it's several hundred years.

Spend a day following me around my toy warehouse and you will see how fit I am. I walk more than five miles a day and lift all the heavy boxes that are

too big for the elves. So, my typical workday requires both aerobic exercise and strength training. I'm much more fit than most people realize. I'm actually in better health than I was 30 years ago.

Health Options: Do you really like to have children leave you milk and cookies?

Santa: I do enjoy some snacks along the way, and milk and cookies help me keep up my energy. I like most everything. Kids should ask their parents what they think I would like. It could be most anything.

Health Options: Do you drink alcoholic beverages or smoke tobacco?

Santa: I never smoke, but I do consume the occasional spiked eggnog on Christmas Day. I never drink alcohol on Christmas Eve. After all, I am driving!

Health Options: Any last thoughts?

Santa: Tell those doctors that although I am big, I'm fit and healthy. Thanks to my daily exercise and Mrs. Claus's great cooking, I have high HDL levels, low triglycerides, and my blood glucose is perfect. After all, I train year-round for my annual Christmas Eve "marathon."

Joannie Dobbs, PhD, CNS and Alan Titchenal, PhD, CNS
are nutritionists in the Department of Human Nutrition, Food and Animal Sciences,
College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, UH-Manoa.
Dr. Dobbs also works with the University Health Service.