



by Brennan Deveraux & Katie Haapala

For the past few years, the Army has prioritized a holistic approach to health and fitness, epitomized by the service's overhaul of its physical fitness test. However, the Army's establishment of its new Combat Fitness Test, and the [subsequent controversy](#) with implementation and equipment, has overshadowed other critical initiatives. One of the most pressing of these is the [Army Body Composition Program \(ABCP\) assessment](#), sparked by the combination of complaints concerning the [effectiveness of the tape test](#), the relevance of a dated height-weight chart, and the [potential for discrimination](#).

While many authors have written on the ABCP, often challenging the service to update its [body fat testing methods](#), an assessment of the program's fundamental purpose is missing from the conversation.

Simply stated, why does the Army care about a Soldier's body fat percentage?

While the answer to this question may seem obvious, an examination of the ABCP's justifications and human costs highlights a need to reimagine the program.

Justifying Body Fat Testing

Before the ABCP can evolve, a discussion regarding its purpose must occur. Generally, the

program justification fits into three different categories: fitness, medical, and appearance.

The first justification is that a Soldier's body fat percentage provides commanders an indication of a Soldier's fitness level. This idea implies that the Army designed the ABCP to supplement a physical fitness assessment. However, while they may mirror each other in scheduling, body fat testing is currently a standalone event. A Soldier could achieve a perfect score on their fitness test but fall outside a dated height-weight ratio and require body fat testing, and if they "bust" on the tape test, have their career put in jeopardy. In contrast, a Soldier who struggles to achieve the bare minimum score may not even require body fat testing based on their body mass index. In this context, the ABCP is unrelated to fitness. Instead, it is simply associated with it. The introduction of the new fitness test challenges this justification even further, as the Army Combat Fitness Test is a detailed assessment of each Soldier's fitness level. Moving forward, if the ABCP is to supplement other fitness tools, the Army should directly link body fat testing to physical performance. For example, this could include only testing Soldiers who fail their fitness tests, cannot conduct every event, or achieve some established "excelling" score overall or per event.

The second justification is that body fat percentage indicates eventual health problems or a higher risk of injury in weight-bearing activities. Notably, current policy deems this health indicator potentially career-ending. Why would this justification not apply to other indicators like [high blood pressure](#), [rampant tobacco and alcohol use](#), or similar health issues and choices? A Soldier should not be flagged or removed from service because they "might" have or are "more likely" to have health issues in the future. Moving forward, if the Army wishes to use body fat testing as an indicator for medical health, it should treat it like similar indicators. This means making the medical community the testing agency and conducting height-weight screening as part of regular medical appointments or periodic health assessments. Like regular blood pressure screening, a Soldier that falls outside recommended height-weight numbers and tape-test measurements should receive the referrals and medical advice currently associated with the ABCP. However, like any medical issue, there should not be a stigma associated with receiving help. In turn, a Soldier should not receive administrative action if it does not limit their ability to perform their assigned job.

The final justification for body fat testing is that it ensures service members maintain a "soldierly appearance." This justification is the weakest and is not in line with societal changes. One can ask what a soldierly appearance is and who defines it to undermine this claim and highlight its potentially discriminatory nature. A simple look at military leaders across time shows that some of America's most famous generals had varying body types. Was one more soldierly looking than another? Do other physical factors impact soldierly

appearance? Should ugly Soldiers be flagged? How about someone with an unseemly scar or birthmark? Cauliflower ear? While hyperbole, this line of reasoning fundamentally challenges any policy that terminates an individual's employment based on their appearance. Appearance has no bearing on the quality or character of a Soldier. In line with this, the Army recently [removed photos](#) from all promotion boards, eliminating "appearance" from the evaluation process. Similarly, the Army should not use body fat testing to judge soldierly appearance. Nor should it terminate someone's employment for how they look; this is not in line with the nation's values and does not represent a "[People First](#)" mentality.

The Human Cost of Body Fat Testing

While the current tape test is one of the most economical means of testing—a factor that the Army's assessment of the ABCP will likely account for—an often-overlooked cost is the toll the program takes on the individual Soldier, the unit, and the service as a whole.

For the individual Soldier, while the cost is primarily their reputation and potentially their career, the pressure to pass the tape test or avoid the process altogether by getting under screening weight can lead to health issues. It is not uncommon for Soldiers who are close to failing to participate in unhealthy weight loss methods on one end of the spectrum—fad diets and overtraining—to downright dangerous options on the other end such as dehydration, starvation, or even abusing over-the-counter drugs like diuretics and laxatives. The Army acknowledges this potential in the [ABCP regulation](#), noting that "Soldiers that are close to exceeding the screening weight may attempt to lose weight quickly in the days leading up to a weigh-in." However, instead of addressing the issue, these "[concerning behaviors](#)" have become part of the Army's culture.

Additionally, failing the screening and tape test puts a Soldier's career in jeopardy. The initial administrative flag prevents promotions or favorable action, and a lack of improvement results in separation. Importantly, this flag remains in a person's record for three years, even if they change organizations. Not only does the stigma of this "Scarlet F" follow a Soldier to their next duty assignment and prevent a fresh start, but if they reenter the program in this three-year window, the unit must initiate separation.

At the unit level, the cost is time, burdening an [already taxed organization](#).

Consequently, this opportunity cost may take away time from training warfighting competencies. As it currently stands, leadership at the company level must screen every Soldier twice annually, with many across the force regularly falling outside of screening

charts and requiring body fat testing. Subsequently, all tape-test failures require counseling directly from the commander, may be required to attend classes with health care providers—taking Soldiers and direct-line supervisors away from their daily tasks—and must be retested monthly for progress. In turn, tracking the completion of each of these steps adds to the already full plates of leaders. This administrative toll is an example of an outdated program burdening command teams.

At the service level, the cost is talent.

Soldiers who leave the Army due to their weight take their experience and expertise from the force. If the Army spends the time and money to train a Soldier but chooses to separate a capable individual because he or she is “fat,” the service has been careless with its limited resources. In an age of Inter-State competition and economic growth, the Army will likely find itself in a “[war for talent](#)” with the other services and the civilian sector. Is the service willing to die on this hill singing, “if you wanna be airborne, you gotta be thin...”? For the strategic benefit of the service, Army leaders must be open to challenging standards that may no longer be serving their intended purposes.

Conclusion

With the ABCP assessment currently underway, the Army has an opportunity to reimagine this long standing program and assess its underlying need for body fat testing. With an emphasis on holistic health and fitness, a retooling of the ABCP better facilitates Army priorities by applying body fat testing on a deliberate and case-by-case basis. If the Army determines that it is needed to supplement fitness tests, it can link body fat testing directly to physical performance. Additionally, the Army can tie body fat screening to periodic health assessments if it is an essential health indicator. Finally, suppose the Army's need to maintain appearance standards drives body fat testing. In that case, it is time for the service to question if this approach aligns with espoused values, potentially leading to program termination.

These changes support the Army's People-First Strategy, unburden command teams, and gradually improve recruiting and retention numbers. Overall, it is time for the Army to overcome its aversion to varying body types and judge Soldiers on their job performance and character. At the end of the day, who cares if Soldiers look fat.

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Who Cares if Soldiers Look Fat? Reimagining the Army's Body Composition Program

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