Don’t quit the gym just because study suggests fatter is better

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As gyms fill up with those resolved to lose weight in 2013, headlines last week touted that somewhat plumper people appear to live longer — news based on a report studying the health of nearly 3 million people.

But don’t throw in the gym towels just yet.

“I don’t think anything about our work should change the standard advice – stop smoking, get exercise – it’s all still good advice,” said Katherine Flegal, one of the study’s authors and a senior scientist at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The goal of the study was to clarify a bevy of research going back more than a decade that indicated people who are “somewhat overweight” live longer — but what did “somewhat overweight” mean? Different researchers had different parameters and Flegal and her colleague set out to define the boundaries.

They didn’t root out the why’s. That will be for someone else to figure out — although they have some guesses.

But as Johanna Kandel prepares to talk to about 250 grade-school nurses in Palm Beach County about obesity prevention and eating disorders, she wonders if the headlines fuel further confusion.

“It’s really mixed messages that we’re getting,” Kandel said. People may hear the news that overweight people live longer and give up.

“It gives permission to people to live unhealthy lifestyles,” Kandel said.

Further, it perpetuates our obsession with numbers.

“It keeps bringing the notion that weight equals health to the forefront, when it should be health equals health,” Kandel said. “There are definitely health ramifications to being morbidly obese, as there are health ramifications to being too thin. It’s bad in a world that’s so number-focused.”
Part of Kandel’s job as director of the Alliance for Eating Disorders Awareness is to teach people how to tread lightly when working to prevent obesity in children.

“A lot of kids I work with, to them skinny equals healthy, pretty and smart, and heavy is bad,” Kandel said.

If a child is ashamed by his or her weight, the feeling won’t motivate healthy changes and could trigger problems, including eating disorders.

The study published Wednesday didn’t address the weight of children.

Instead, it looked at American adults — more than two-thirds of whom are overweight or obese, according to the CDC.

The authors sought to clarify the risk of death based on a person’s body mass index, an estimation of a person’s body fat based on a ratio of their weight to height.

People whose BMI range from 18.5 to 24.9 are considered normal weight. Overweight includes BMI from 25 to 29.9, and those with BMIs of 30 and above are considered obese. The study also considered degrees of overweight.

After reviewing studies that included 2.88 million people and more than 270,000 deaths, the authors concluded that those who were ranked as overweight had less risk of dying than those of normal weight. And, those who were in the lowest level of obesity — from 30 to 34.9 BMI — were not more likely to die than people of normal weight.

“We would like to see a better understanding of what these differences mean,” Flegal said.

For example, it could be that someone who is overweight may be under the closer supervision of a doctor and thus any illness is better spotted or managed.

Or, that excess fat can serve as needed “nutritional reserves” if, for example, you become sick, or are injured in a traffic accident, Flegal said.

Flegal and her colleagues wanted to get a better picture of mortality rates using a common scale of BMI as an indicator of healthy weight.

While using BMI helps standardize the research, it’s an imperfect measure of how much someone should weigh.

“BMI is only one tool to try to measure what your appropriate weight should be,” said Dr. Alina Alonso, director of the Palm Beach County Health Department.

Belly girth, for example, may be more telling in some situations.
“Fat per se is not as bad as we thought,” Dr. Kamyar Kalantar-Zadeh, professor of medicine and public health at the University of California, Irvine told The New York Times.

“What is bad is a type of fat that is inside your belly,” Kalantar-Zadeh told the paper. “Non-belly fat, underneath your skin in your thigh and your butt area — these are not necessarily bad.”

Alonso is working on a countywide program to attack childhood obesity that concentrates on different numbers: 5-2-1-0. That’s one day with at least five servings of fruits and vegetables, a limit of two hours in front of TV and computers, one hour of physical activity and no sugary drinks.

Because the focus is healthy behavior and not numbers on the scale, Alonso doesn’t think the study will detract from the get-healthy message.

In 2010, the CDC reported that about 12 percent of children ages 2-5 years are already beyond overweight and obese, as were 18 percent of 6- to 11-year-olds and more than 18 percent of 12-to 19-year-olds.

Should they remain obese into adulthood, the picture is bleak. Mortality rates among the most obese subjects in the study were “significantly higher,” its authors reported.

“The most important issue, I believe, is that the general public remain aware that in the U.S., as well as the world, cigarettes and obesity are major avoidable causes of premature death and disability,” said Dr. Charles Hennekens, an epidemiologist at Florida Atlantic University’s college of medicine. “Thus, clinical and public health efforts at their prevention, treatment and control are among the most important for the health of individual patients as well as the general public.”