BMI Comparison

Chart showing BMI (y-axis 0–30) from 1960 to 2000 with categories: Overweight, Normal, Underweight. Lines for Average Woman, Miss America, Model.
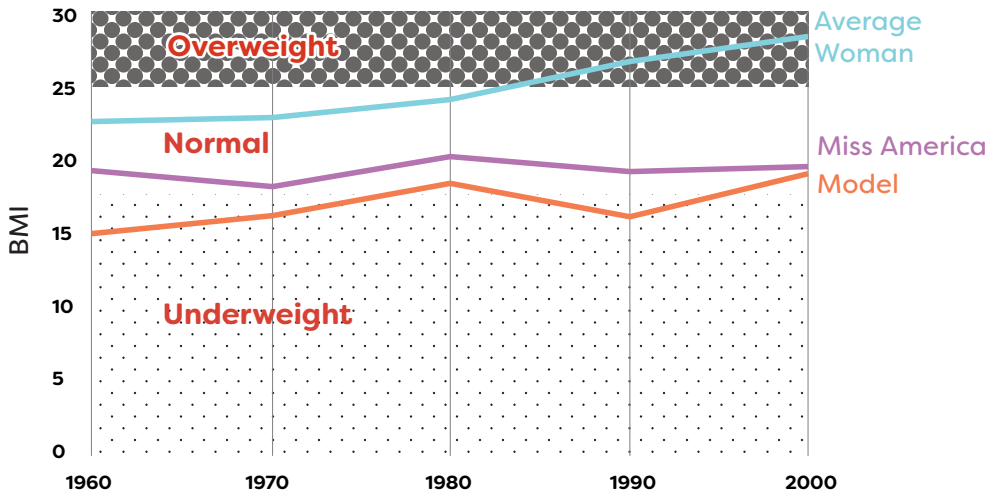
What is BMI?

BMI stands for body mass index and it is a way to quantify the tissue mass of an individual. The formula for calculating BMI is body weight divided by height squared ($kg/h^2 = BMI$). From there, scientists and doctors can attempt to categorize the individual as underweight, normal, overweight, and obese. Because it does not directly measure body fat, it should only be used as a screening method and not as a way to determine body fatness or overall health.

In the above chart, the most commonly accepted BMI ranges were used to categorize underweight, normal, and overweight. By using these categories, it is easy to see how the average woman compares to Miss America winners and Models through the decades. The average American woman's BMI has increased from 22.7 (normal) in 1960 to 28.5 (overweight) in 2000, getting closer and closer to the "obese" range of BMI. In comparison, the Miss America's are staying within the normal range, however in recent years they are starting to veer downwards towards unhealthy. Finally, as is suspected, models from 1960 to 2000 teeter on the edge of unhealthy.

How Do Images of the "The Ideal" Affect the Average Woman?

Advertising and Self Esteem

The women portrayed in magazines and other forms of advertising have a tremendous effect on the body image of women – young and old. The models themselves are thin enough to begin with, but editors of magazines thin them out even further with Photoshop and add to the unrealistic standards. This can be particularly damaging on teenagers and children. According to the Center on Media and Child Health, heavy readers of Teen Vogue and Seventeen magazine are twice as likely to engage in unhealthy weight control behaviors, like developing an eating disorder. Moreover, the standards of beauty that advertisements portray makes even normal weight girls think they should lose weight –36% of normal weight girls are dieting, and 50% of overweight girls are dieting in America (ncbi.nlm.nih.gov). It's clear the perception of being overweight is damaging young girls' self esteem, regardless of whether or not they are actually overweight.

Self Esteem and Depression

"Women are generally characterized by being concerned about attractiveness, and less satisfied with their appearance based on achieving unrealistic standards of thinness," (eatingdisorderhope.com) Because society's ideas about attractiveness, thinness, and success are so intertwined, women are susceptible to depression when they don't feel they are living up to these standards. They feel they are not beautiful enough and are therefore less successful in life, which leads to unhappiness and depression, which leads to more feelings of self-hate and so the viscous cycle ensues. In a recent study, adolescents with body dysmorphic disorder displayed more symptoms of depression, anxiety, and suicidality than teenagers with mood or behavioral disorders. "These findings underscore just how central feelings about one's appearance tend to be in the world of teenagers and how impairing these concerns can be," says Jennifer Dyl, PhD who was the lead author of the study from Brown Medical School, (sciencedaily.com).

Is it Improving??

According to the images and content of these November 2016 magazine covers, are they finally paying attention to the consumer? On one hand, the women on the magazine are still below the BMI of the average woman. On the other hand, the messages and content they are promoting are generally body positive. But if the messages don't match the women, will it be enough?

Magazine covers: Seventeen, Elle (Kristen Stewart), Cosmopolitan (Zooey), Vogue (Emily Blunt)

Sources
Height and Weight of Miss America Winners: pbs.org
*Height and Weight of Average Woman: CDC Surveys*
BMI: CDC

The Ideal Woman

Jordin Kelsey | Fall 2016

What does the ideal woman look like? Is she skinny or curvy? Tall or short? Does she have blonde hair or brown hair? When we look at normal constructs of beauty, there are so many factors involved, including, but not limited to, height, fat content, breast size, symmetry, hair color, skin color, or how long her legs are. By comparing the average American woman's weight and height to the average Miss America winners' and supermodels' weight and height, we can start to get an idea of how the normal woman compares to socially accepted images of "the ideal."

1960

The 1960s were full of pop, glamour, and fake eyelashes. Not only was it the start of "mod" – thick eyeliner, geometric prints, and platinum bobs – but it was the beginning of a new era of models. Jean Shrimpton and her super slender frame paved the way for other "It" girls, like Twiggy, who became the face of a decade.


Miss America: 5'6" 120 lbs | Average: 5'3" 128 lbs | Twiggy: 5'8" ~100 lbs
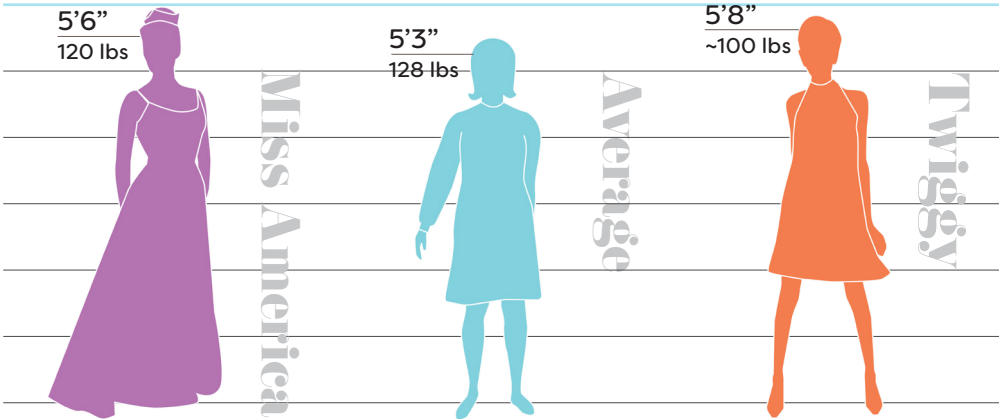
1970

The 70s were full of sequins, fringe, and wide-leg pants, thanks to celebrities like Diana Ross, Cher, and Elton John. At the other end of high-fashion however, the everyday person was sporting cowl-neck sweaters, flared jeans, flowing tops, or platform shoes. The bright colors of the 1960's were soon retired for earth tones.


Miss America: 5'7" 117 lbs | Average: 5'4" 134 lbs | Jerry Hall: 6'0" 120 lbs
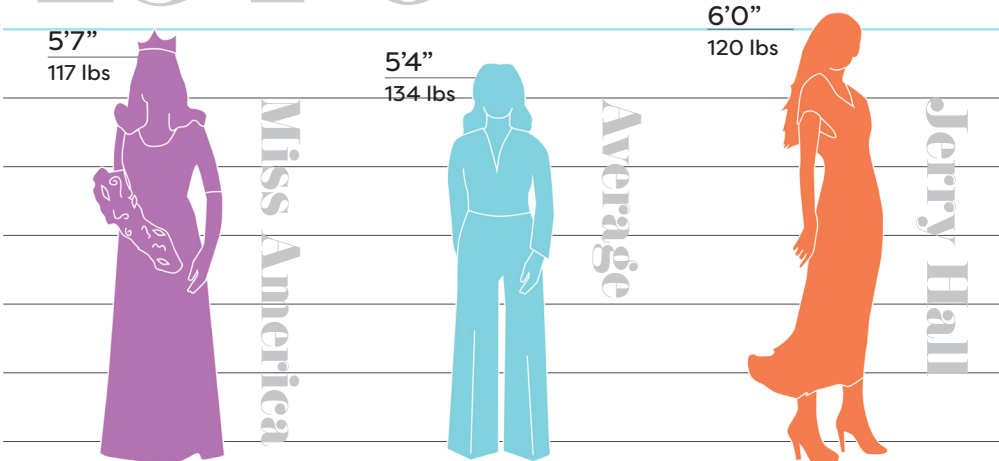
1980

The beginning of the 80s looked much like the late 70s – subdued colors, high waistlines, etc. However, celebrities like Cyndi Lauper and Madonna soon changed the game. And thanks to MTV, teens everywhere became part of the fads that we associate with the 80s today. Namely, neon colors, bright headbands, legwarmers, and "Cosby" sweaters.
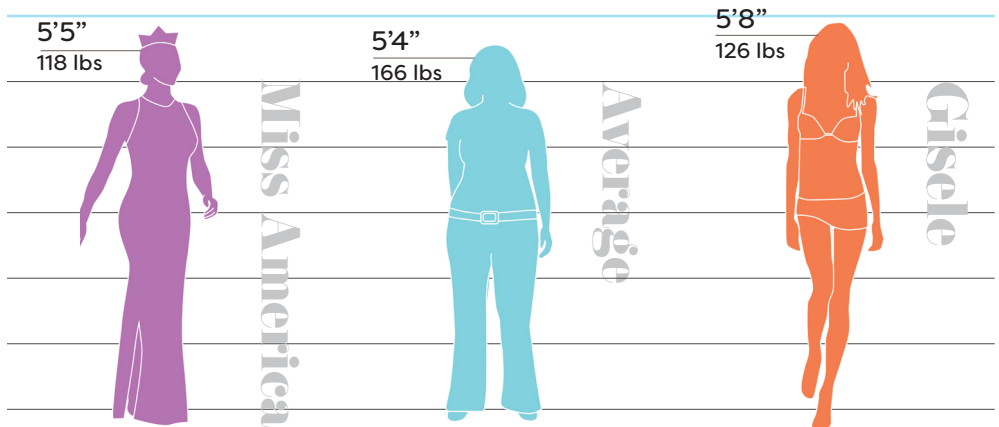

Miss America: 5'6" 126 lbs | Average: 5'4" 141 lbs | Cindy Crawford: 5'9" 125 lbs
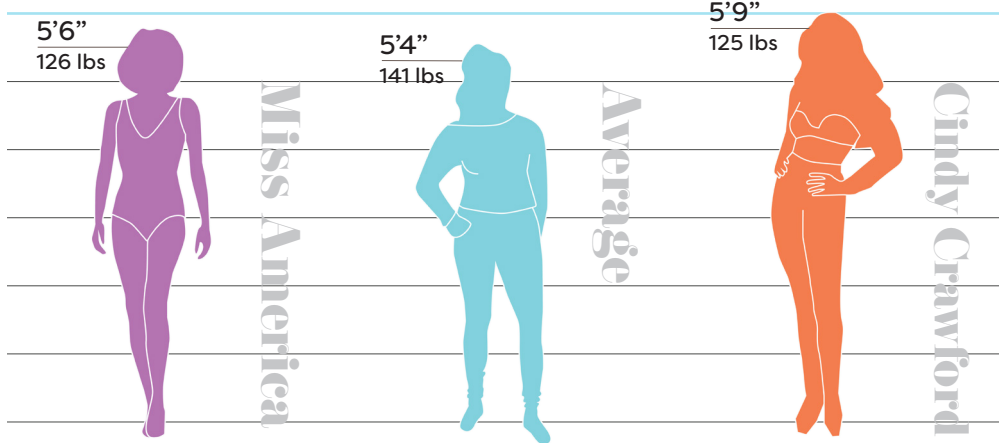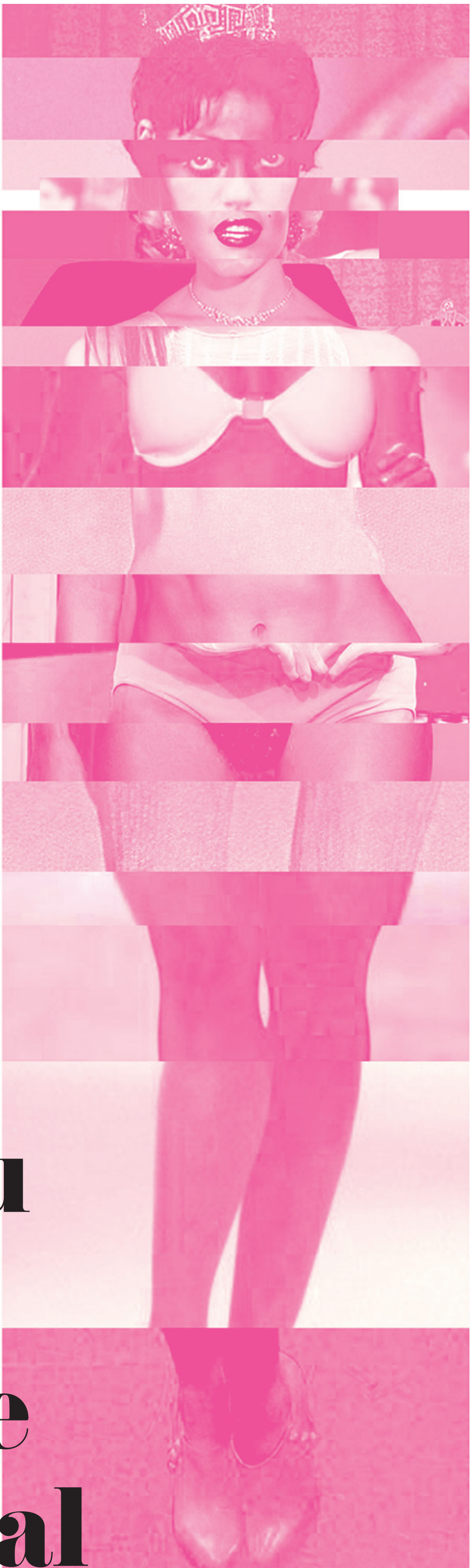
1990

In the early 90s, the color pop of the 80s was staying strong. Things changed when the grunge era started however, encouraging young people to grow out their hair and cut up their jeans. Mini skirts, flannels, and subdued colors became mainstream, along with the 'urban hip hop' style. Thanks 2Pac!

Miss America: 5'8" 126 lbs | Average: 5'4" 156 lbs | Kate Moss: 5'7" 104 lbs
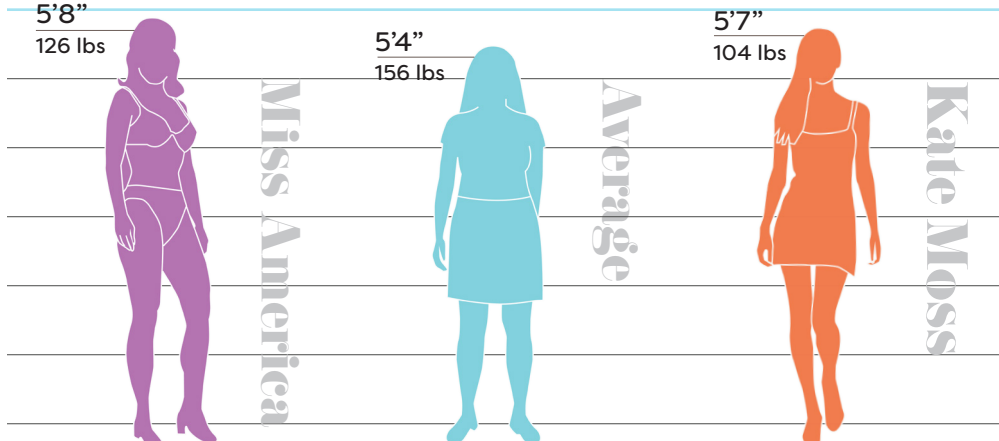
2000

Arguably, people lost themselves in the 2000s... The only things that seems to stand out in our minds are low-rise jeans, tube tops, and Juicy Couture track suits. Think Paris Hilton and Britney Spears post-breakdown. It was at least a profitable time for high-fashion again, as they started to bring people back from grunge.

Miss America: 5'5" 118 lbs | Average: 5'4" 166 lbs | Gisele: 5'8" 126 lbs

Do
You
Fit
The
Ideal