

## Americans: Bigger By the Day

by

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Why are Americans getting bigger by the day? And what's so bad about that anyway? Studies have shown that there are many negative effects associated with obesity. Obesity has been accused of contributing to many long-term conditions, such as heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, osteoarthritis, diabetes and cancer (Pennybacker 15). Along with the fact that obesity is the most common form of malnutrition in the Western world, it also affects sixty-four percent of Americans (Pennybacker 15; Brownell 1). Obesity is one of today's most visible, yet neglected conditions affecting more Americans each day.

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the definition of obesity is “a condition characterized by excessive bodily fat” (Merriam-Webster). Moreover, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention labels the obesity problem as an “epidemic” (Brownell 1). Basically, obesity is the long-term result of a diet that delivers more calories in than are consumed through daily activity. Nevertheless, obesity is a serious medical condition that impacts a high percentage of Americans and should be treated with concern.

There are many possible factors for the rise in the number of overweight and obese Americans. Brownell outlines these factors very well in *Food Fight* and writes, “The reasons for this growing problem are simple and complex at the same time. People eat too much and exercise too little...” (Brownell 2). Furthermore, by taking a look at the modern lifestyle of our world today, one could say it does not discourage obesity in the least way. One obstacle Americans need to overcome is to find the time in their busy schedules to exercise. It is much too easy to travel in cars, as opposed to walking or biking. Many people sit all day in an office, and

do not get much physical activity at all. The conveniences and technology of today contribute to a very sedentary lifestyle for much of the population. According to Food Fight, one study found that 23 percent of all deaths from major chronic disease could be attributed to sedentary lifestyle (Brownell 70). The lack of exercise is one of the main causes of obesity in the United States.

Another possible contribution to obesity, which is still in the process of being further researched, is genetics. According to the Office of Genomics & Disease Prevention, studies indicate that inherited genetic variation is an important risk factor for obesity. It was also pointed out that genetic factors are starting to be questioned in the degree of effectiveness of diet and physical activity interventions for weight reduction (Obesity and Genetics I). Learning how genetic variations effect obesity will make it much easier to prevent and treat the condition of obesity.

In addition to the many different causes of obesity, fast food receives much of the blame. With the continual growth of the fast food industry in the United States, obesity is becoming a bigger problem everyday. The connection between fast food and obesity is one of the primary criticisms in the book, *Fast Food Nation*, written by Eric Schlosser. Due to the high-calorie, high-fat food choices offered at many restaurants, both consumers and experts are quick to point their fingers at fast food restaurants. In the book, he states, "If you look at the rise of the obesity rate in the United States, it's grown pretty much in step with the rise of fast-food consumption...and now it's the second leading cause of death in the United States, after smoking" (Schlosser 1). When McDonald's was asked to respond to former charges by Schlosser, they stated that forty five million customers make the choice of dining at McDonald's every single day (CBS News). The point they were trying to get across is that the fast food restaurant customers are responsible for the persistent growth of the fast food industry. They are

the ones choosing to put this type of food into their digestive systems. These restaurants would not be so profitable if it were not for the high demand for their food products by consumers.

Another source provided a statement from Dr. Cathy Kapica, Global Director of Nutrition for McDonald's, regarding the responsibility of the customer: "It is not where you eat, but the food choices you make, and especially how much you eat." She then addressed the fact that McDonald's offers a wide variety of different foods, and portion styles that can be a significant part of a healthy diet ("Meet McDonald's").

An opposing opinion on the correlation between fast food and obesity came from *HealthDay Reporter* magazine. According to Amanda Gardner in *HealthDay Reporter*, a study was conducted on individuals' dietary habits. There were 3,301 adults surveyed between ages eighteen and thirty. The results showed that individuals who ate fast food more than twice a week gained an extra ten pounds in just six months, and had a twofold greater increase in insulin resistance than people who ate it less than once a week (Gardner 2). The outcome of the study indicates that eating a high fat diet can lead to weight gain and eventually, obesity.

Although fast food is often blamed because of its high caloric content, it is simply a contributing factor. Obesity is caused by over eating, poor food choices, genetics and lack of exercise as well. Whether it is from fast food or not, extra weight is put on by not burning as many calories as the number taken in. Dining in restaurants can encourage this unhealthy habit by providing enough food for two or more people on a single plate. Frequent visits to restaurants can then compound the effect of too much food, too often. According to Kelly Brownell, more than 40 percent of adults eat at a restaurant on a typical day. The frequency of eating out is associated with higher calorie and fat intake and increased body weight, while eating meals at

home is associated with better calorie intake (Brownell 36). When it comes to healthy eating, it can be easier for one to make better healthful choices in his or her own kitchen.

In our world today, obesity affects people of all ages. A common misconception is that obesity is only an adult problem. In the United States, more children suffer from obesity than ever before. The Centers for Disease Control estimate that 23 percent of American children are overweight, in comparison to only four percent in the 1960s. Obesity causes the young to be at risk for problems that used to be common only in adults, such as cardiovascular disease, high cholesterol and blood pressure, and type two diabetes (Pennybacker).

There are many different suggestions for the prevention of and fight against obesity. The first and most obvious recommendation is to lose weight. Because obesity is a condition requiring continuous attention, any behavior changes required to maintain weight loss must be lifelong. In order to lose weight, it is necessary to decrease caloric intake, increase caloric expenditure, or do both (CBS News). According to Greg Critser in *Fatlands*, the response is simple, but not always easy: We need to burn at least as many calories as we take in (Schlosser 2). It has been proven that physical activity is a vital component of a healthy lifestyle, whether a person is overweight or not. It is recommended to participate in moderate levels of physical activity for thirty to forty minutes, three to five times each week (Mathur). It can be difficult to meet this recommendation, but it eventually causes a positive long-term result.

Obesity is one of today's most visible, yet most neglected conditions affecting more Americans each day. The possible causes of obesity include fast food, genetics and lack of physical activity. Although it is a growing problem, today we have the resources and knowledge available to overcome obesity. It is up to Americans to assist in the prevention of this condition that affects such a high percentage of its people.

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