

The Real Culprits in the Obesity Epidemic

*Gluttony, sloth, and abdication of personal responsibility are the reasons for obesity.
Everything else is an excuse.*



There is no doubt that the rising prevalence in obesity among adults and children has major implications for healthcare costs, quality of life, and lifespan. The statistics are sobering: roughly one-third of US adults are obese (BMI > 30 kg/m²); adding overweight (BMI > 25-29.9 kg/m²) adults to the mix increases the figure to 68% (3). In other words, 2 of every 3 adults in the US are overweight or obese. Making matters worse, research indicates that 17% of kids (ages 2 - 19) are obese, not a great way to get started in life (3). Regardless of how errant BMI might be at accurately characterizing the overweight and obese, a quick trip to any shopping mall in the country confirms the obvious: too many Americans are fat. In 2010, fat Americans racked up over \$250 billion in medical treatment costs (1).

There is no doubt that obesity is a highly complex, multi-faceted issue. For that reason, a lot of bright, talented, dedicated researchers are focused on the topic. Epidemiologists, clinicians, sociologists, psychologists, endocrinologists, exercise scientists, pharmacologists, nutritionists, physiologists, molecular biologists, geneticists, and scientists from many other disciplines are devoting large chunks of their careers to try to help unravel the mysteries underlying pervasive obesity.

Yet the fundamentals of the obesity epidemic remain starkly simple: whenever energy input consistently exceeds energy output, the excess energy is converted to fat.

The culprits responsible for America's progressively expanding waistline have little to do with the usual suspects popularized by the media. For example, high-fructose corn syrup is not the culprit. Vending machines in schools are not the culprits. Food and drink advertising are not the culprits. Insufficient walking and cycling paths are not the culprits. Fast food restaurants aren't the culprits. Sugar in breakfast cereals isn't the culprit. School lunches aren't the culprits. Bisphenol A (BPA) in the liners of soft drink cans is not the culprit. Soft drinks aren't the culprits. Hormones aren't the culprits. Absence of calorie counts on restaurant menus isn't the culprit -- and the addition of calorie counts courtesy of Obamacare will not be the solution. Happy Meals aren't the

culprits -- and adding fruit to Happy Meals has not been the solution. Low food prices are not the culprit. Automation in the workplace is not the culprit. Cheese consumption is not the culprit. Obesogens in packaging are not the culprit. Nor are gut bacteria or restaurant portion sizes

The real culprits in the obesity epidemic are **lack of personal responsibility** and its henchmen, **gluttony** and **sloth**. In scientific lingo, "*Recent epidemic increases in the incidence of obesity in developed countries are closely related to increased availability and intake of palatable energy-dense food and declining levels of physical activity*" (2). In other words, the rise in obesity is related to gluttony (eating too much) and sloth (moving too little). After all, we have voluntary control over when, what, and how much we eat as well as how, when, how long, and how hard we exercise. While there are many factors that influence energy intake and energy expenditure, the simple fact of the matter is that our ability to gain, maintain, or lose fat weight is fully under our control. Simply put, we don't have to go to the refrigerator every time we feel a hunger pang and we don't have to sit and watch television every time we feel tired.

Sloth and gluttony are common among Americans. The Center for Disease Control estimates that only 35% of US adults regularly engage in leisure-time physical activity (3 times per week or more of light/moderate or vigorous exercise) and 33% engage in no physical activity at all (4). The same study shows that almost 60% of US adults over 18 do no vigorous physical activity lasting 10 minutes or more. Making matters worse, Americans continue to eat more, although the increase is only a fraction of a percent each year; between 1971 and 2000, mean daily energy intake rose 6.5% in men over age 20 and 18% in women and there's little indication that the trend is reversing (5).

Do genes doom people to obesity? There is little doubt that genetics play a role in increasing the risk of obesity in part because there is a statistically significant association between genetics and BMI. For example, identical twins raised apart usually (but not always) have similar BMIs as adults, whereas nonidentical (fraternal) twins usually (but not always) have different BMIs (7). Although there are other factors too numerous to mention that also influence BMI, it shouldn't be surprising that our genes have a major influence on our risk of becoming obese. But *increased risk of obesity* does not translate into *certainty of obesity* because decisions about daily energy balance (energy in vs energy out) are fully under our control.

Sloth, gluttony, and the related abdication of personal responsibility are causing the obesity epidemic in the US. Blaming easy targets such as fast-food meals or soft drinks further enables the it's-not-my-fault mentality that fuels the epidemic. "Eat less and move more" will always be a useful recommendation and should be accompanied by "because it's your responsibility to maintain a healthy weight for yourself and your loved ones."

References

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