

The Real Culprits in the Obesity Epidemic

*Gluttony, sloth, and abrogation 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: over 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% (Flegal, 2010). In other words, 2 of every 3 adults in the US are fat. Making matters worse, research indicates that 16% of kids are obese, not a great way to get started in life (CDC 1). Regardless of how errant the 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.

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. Genes aren't the culprits. Soft drinks aren't the culprits. Hormones aren't the culprits. Obesogens aren't the culprits. Happy Meals aren't the culprits. Gut bacteria aren't the culprits. Low food prices are not the culprit. Automation in the workplace is not the culprit.

The real culprits in the obesity epidemic are **lack of personal responsibility** and its henchmen, **gluttony** and **sloth**. In scientific language, "*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*" (Borer, 2010). 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 a little tired.

Sloth and gluttony are common among Americans. The Center for Disease Control estimates that only one-third of US adults regularly (3 times per week or more) engage in leisure-time physical activity (light/moderate or vigorous) and 36% engage in no physical activity at all (CDC 2). The same study shows that almost 60% of US adults over 18 engage in no vigorous physical activity lasting 10 minutes or more. Exacerbating the lack of physical activity, Americans continue to eat more; mean daily energy intake rose 6.5% in men over age 20 and 18% in women from 1971 to 2000 and there's little indication that the trend is reversing (CDC 3).

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. The useful recommendation to "eat less and move more" should be accompanied by "because it's your responsibility to maintain a healthy weight for yourself and your kids."

References

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