

Why are we so **Fat** (and what can be done about it)?

By Tim Henriques

IF YOU HAVE READ ANY NEWSPAPERS OR MAGAZINES LATELY, OR EVEN GONE TO A MALL AND SIMPLY PEOPLE WATCHED, YOU HAVE NOTICED THAT AMERICANS ARE GETTING FATTER AND FATTER. SINCE 1980, THE PERCENTAGE OF OBESE AMERICANS HAS BEEN CLIMBING STEADILY WITH NO INDICATION OF REVERSING THE TREND. APPROXIMATELY 50 PERCENT OF THE POPULATION IS SIGNIFICANTLY OVERWEIGHT. WHY?



Nutrition is a poorly understood science and obesity is a hotly debated topic. However, some facts are clear. Consume more calories than you burn and you will gain weight. Clearly there is some truth to that. When I eat less and exercise more, I lose weight every time. At a more complex level though, why some people seem more predisposed for weight gain than others is not well understood. Two of my aunts are identical twins that weigh within a pound of each other. The idea that throughout their lives (they are over 60) they have eaten and exercised within 3500 calories of each other is preposterous. Obviously our body has some way to regulate how much weight we gain.

While obesity may not yet be fully understood, that does not mean we should throw up our hands in disgust and forget about trying to fight the battle of the bulge. I believe there are four key factors that contribute to a person being overweight, and the most encouraging aspect about them is they are all under our control.

Portion Size – Over the past several decades Americans have been consuming more and more food. Eating large portions has become the norm. We don't think it is odd when someone is drinking 32 ounces of coke, and eight-ounce bottles are hard to find. In reality the kids' sized portions at restaurants provide an adequate amount of food for almost all adults, especially since we should be eating multiple small meals per day (4-6) instead of 2-3 large meals. We simply eat too much and now we expect a certain amount of food when we sit down to eat. Studies have shown that we will eat what is in front of us. It is much better to take a small portion of food and allow yourself to get seconds than to pile a huge amount of food in front of you at once. Ways to control portions are: to eat on small plates, limit yourself to a certain number of "spoonfuls," say one or two serving size spoonfuls of mashed potatoes, or weigh your food if you really want to know what is going into your body. In general, most of the food you eat should be in four-ounce servings. For

example, if you want steak, potatoes and broccoli, that's fine. But don't have a 12-ounce steak, a huge potato, and one or two pieces of broccoli. Instead have about four ounces of steak (cut the steak into thirds or halves), four ounces of potatoes (one large serving spoon amount) and four ounces of broccoli (fill a small cereal bowl). Controlling our portions allows us to eat less food and therefore consume fewer calories. If you eat and are still hungry, tell yourself to wait 15 minutes and then, if you are still hungry, you can eat more. Generally by that time you will be satisfied.

Prevalence of Eating Out – Going to restaurants used to be a special occasion but now it has become the norm. It is not uncommon for people to eat out two or three times a week, every week, when it used to be two to three times a month. Throw in take out lunches and some people are getting more take-out than homemade meals. Not only is this expensive, but more importantly, restaurant food is generally not as healthy as food you make at home. Restaurants serve large portions so you are often getting a lot of food, and they tend to serve food with a higher fat and sugar content because that tastes good. Americans generally select their food because of taste and not nutrition. We have to get rid of the idea that eating out is a special occasion because that attitude allows us to eat whatever we want. While I appreciate special occasions for what they really are, you can't have a special occasion every Friday and Saturday night. If you do eat out a lot, here are some tips to help you drop some calories. Order your protein with no sauce and go for lean choices like: fish, chicken (with no skin), filet mignon, and turkey. Substitute mixed vegetables or a small salad for French fries. Decide what you are going to eat before you go to the restaurant and be firm with that decision. Tell your significant other or write it down. Often we tell ourselves that we will eat something (like a grilled chicken salad), but once we get in there and smell the food we change our mind and get the ribs or something not as healthy. If it is a large meal like dinner, divide the food in half as soon as you get it and save the other half for later or throw it away. Get the kids' sized portion for yourself. Avoid appetizers and tasty breads, as they tend to have poor nutrient ratios.

Lack of Physical Activity – Most Americans know that they need to exercise more but that is only half the problem. Not only do we need more exercise, we need more physical activity. Today's technologically advanced lifestyle means we burn less and less calories. Remember almost nobody exercised 100 years ago because life itself was the exercise. We rode horses or walked, we didn't sit in cars. We chopped wood and hand washed our laundry. Machines did not do everything for us. I am not advocating getting rid of technology, but we do need to be aware that as we make even more progress exercise will become even more important. If you want to lose weight

through exercise you should exercise a minimum of three times a week for an hour each time. Your goal should be to burn 400 calories at a minimum each time you work out. A combination of lifting weights and cardio is generally the best approach for improving your health and reducing your bodyfat.

Processed Foods – The final factor contributing to obesity is the over-consumption of processed foods. Processed foods are foods that come in a can, a box, a sealed package, or out of machine. Junk food like chips, soda, French fries, cookies, crackers, etc. are all examples of processed food. Foods that can sit around for six months without spoiling are normally processed. There are several problems with processed food. First, they tend to be very high in sodium and sugar. These are two things we crave when we are hungry so we often reach for processed foods. In addition, they are usually lacking in fiber and other nutrients. Because they are processed and have little fiber, our bodies digest them more easily. This might sound good but it means we can absorb more calories from them (not good) and we eat more because we don't think we are full (not good). Processed foods affect our blood sugar more rapidly than natural foods. This causes our insulin to spike and makes the food we eat more likely to be stored as fat. Over the long term, these insulin spikes, combined with being overweight and not exercising, cause an increased risk for diabetes, which is currently fifth leading cause of death. Of course, processed foods do taste good, which means we are even more likely to over eat them.

Clearly, the problem of obesity is not going to be solved by a quick fix. However, there is a solution to this problem. If you or someone you know is struggling with his or her weight, remember that the combination of avoiding large portions, not eating out at restaurants, increasing your exercise and daily physical activity, and reducing your consumption of processed foods will make a big difference in how you feel and how you look. Also, remember, a good goal for weight loss after the first week is one to two pounds per week or one percent of your bodyweight. Even a small amount of weight loss per week adds up to a lot over time (a half pound a week is 26 lbs a year!) It will not be easy or happen overnight, but you can prevent and get rid of excess weight. Even the longest journey begins with a single first step.



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