

# Is the fast food industry responsible for the obesity epidemic in america? essay ...

[Health & Medicine](#), [Obesity](#)



Obesity is defined as the condition of being excessively fat or overweight. The distinction between being obese and being overweight is determined by a weight-to-height ratio known as the Body Mass Index (or BMI). This ratio is calculated by dividing one's weight in kilograms by the square of their height in meters, which results in a number typically between 15 and 40. In the United States any BMI that exceeds 30 is considered obese, while a BMI above 25 is considered overweight. To be underweight, one's BMI must be below 18.5, so anywhere between 18.6 and 24.9 is considered healthy. In 2010 the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (or CDC) announced that every single state in America had an obesity rate above 20%, and twelve states even exceeded 30%. America is not only the land of the free, but the land of the fat as well. More than a third of American adults and 17% of children are obese. This staggering figure is the result of what the US government has deemed a nationwide epidemic. An epidemic is defined as a widespread occurrence of an infectious disease or undesirable phenomena.

The tale of America's obesity epidemic begins in 1975, when the adult obesity rate was just below 15%. By 1995 the rate had risen to more than 23% and in 2010 it reached 33.8%. Just 21 years ago there was not a single state with an obesity rate above 20%, yet last year there was not a single state with an obesity rate below 20%. American citizens spend more on health care than any other industrialized country; likely a result of the fact that 74.6% of adults are either overweight or obese. According to the Frequently Asked Questions page of the CDC's website, "in the United States approximately 112,000 deaths a year are associated with obesity".

Obesity causes a number of diseases and conditions such as type 2 diabetes,

hypertension, heart disease, gallbladder disease, breast cancer, colon cancer, arthritis, stroke, physical disability, breathing problems, and lower back pain. The Frequently Asked Questions page also states that, “ Seven of the 10 leading causes of death in the United States are chronic diseases, the top two being heart disease and cancer. Mortality is an important indicator of the severity of a public health problem, because many chronic diseases are affected by obesity.”

Individuals with obesity need to realize that the duration and quality of their lifespan hinges upon the pursuit of a healthy lifestyle. If the obese population understood that their excess weight will eventually affect their overall well-being, they would be much more committed to losing weight. Many individuals have chosen to neglect a healthy lifestyle and obesity has flourished as a result. The epidemic has increased at such an alarming rate that it has aroused concern from our nation’s disease prevention agency. My research conducted on the CDC’s database left me with a single question: why has the prevalence of obesity increased so much in such a short period of time? I found the most straightforward answer to this question by examining the underlying cause of weight gain. In a Food Science course I took a few semesters ago I learned that an increase in weight occurs when the amount of calories utilized in a day does not exceed the amount of calories consumed that same day.

The more calories we take in, the more active we must be to burn them off. Dr. Jeffrey Weiss, head of the Insulite Laboratories Medical Advisory Board, has concluded that, “ In the 1960’s, men consumed an average of 2, 200

calories per day, but by 2000 that figure had increased to 2,700 calories per day. During the same period, women went from 1,500 to 1,950 calories per day” (Weiss “ Why We Eat”). The level of physical activity in America did not increase as vigorously as our calorie intake, so the average weight of Americans went up. For hundreds of years our ancestors have eaten roughly the same amount of calories, but in the last 50 years our consumption of calories has increased nearly 20%. Dr. John Foreyt, obesity expert at Baylor College of Medicine, concluded that, “ At the rate the average waistline is expanding in the United States, everyone will be overweight in another 100 years . . . It’s not our genes that are the problem; it’s our environment” (Weiss “ Why We Eat”). Serving sizes have been dramatically increased in the land of the free because the demand for larger portions has forced restaurants to value quantity over quality. Our environment is constantly telling us that gluttony is good and the primary facilitators of this message are the cable companies. The Food Network’s most popular show is about a man who travels the country in search of restaurants that have insane food challenges.

Events that showcase the gorging talents of competitive eaters are also very popular. On February 3rd, 2012 an eating competition took place in front of a sold out 20,000 seat arena in Philadelphia. During the 30 minute long carnival of gluttony a man named Takeru Kobayashi ate 337 wings; earning himself \$20,000 and a super bowl style ring. The 127 pound man has also eaten 40 slices of pizza in 12 minutes, 81 soft tacos in 10 minutes and 24 bowls of Taiwan lamb pot in five-and-a-half minutes. Kobayashi is sponsored

by three dozen different companies and is undoubtedly the leader of the 'sport' of competitive eating. America's obsession with excessively large portions is only part of the problem. To fully understand the obesity epidemic we need to focus on what people eat as well as how much they eat. Every day approximately 27 million American's (11.4% of the population) eat at McDonald's. There is one McDonald's for every 22,000 people in the United States, and each one serves an average of 1,900 people each day. According to McDonald's financial report, their revenue from the 2010 fiscal year was \$32.4 billion (more than \$88 million per day).

The reason that McDonald's is so successful is because they have mastered the ability to manufacture and effectively market their products, which have massive quantities of calories and can be easily purchased for a relatively cheap price. In 1989, Wendy's became the first nationwide chain to offer items for 99 cents; setting what would soon become the standard for fast food menus. Just two years later McDonald's began experimenting with their dollar menu and when Burger King realized how successful the price reductions were becoming they introduced their own nationwide value menu. The new menu/marketing strategies decreased profit margins, which should have decreased profits as well, but an increase in sales drove profits up. The following chart depicts the rise of obesity rates in America, while the second chart depicts the rise of McDonald's annual revenue from 1990 to 2010.

(" Obesity Data and Statistics")

(" McDonald's Annual Reports")

Wendy's and Burger King have also seen a dramatic revenue increase in the last twenty years, but on a much smaller scale than McDonald's. From 1990 to 2010 the obesity rate in America nearly tripled, and in that same time span McDonald's revenue nearly quadrupled. So why is there such a strong correlation between these two ever rising statistics?

My search for the solution to this question led me to a fairly basic ratio known as calories-per-dollar. The amount of calories contained in a meal is divided by the price of the meal plus tax. This simple equation results in a calories-per-dollar ratio, which skyrocketed when fast food chains began introducing their dollar menus. A dollar spent at Wendy's prior to 1989 would have purchased a maximum of 217 calories; a relatively small figure compared to the 405 calories-per-dollar I would get from the Crispy Chicken Caesarwrap today. The top four calories-per-dollar items at Wendy's, McDonald's and Burger King are all items from their dollar menu. The Spicy Chick'n Crisp Sandwich from Burger King contains a whopping 430 calories-per-dollar, which makes it the highest calorie-per-dollar item in America. These statistics are important because a customer who spends five dollars on Burger King's dollar menu can purchase up to 2, 150 calories; 150 more than the recommended intake of 2000 calories per day. This five dollar order also delivers 150 grams of total fat and 25 grams of saturated fat. The following chart contains three fast food chain's dollar menu items as well as a few of their higher calorie items and is arranged in order of highest calories-per-dollar to lowest calories-per-dollar.

In the last twenty years the relationship between calories and purchasing price has almost increased as dramatically as America's obesity rate. So now I finally come to the question that I began with: Is the fast food industry responsible for the obesity epidemic in America? My immediate response is no, simply because they are not forcing people to eat their food. Every year the fast food industry spends millions of dollars marketing their calorie-packed dollar menu items, but they are not forcing people to watch their advertisements or act on their impulses. Many fast food critics place a certain degree of blame on McDonald's because their advertising campaigns have targeted children who do not know how unhealthy their food is, but I believe that the real recipient of this blame should be those that are responsible for teaching children about nutrition. It should be the responsibility of parents and teachers to set good examples and educate children about the harmful effects that can be brought about by the consumption of unhealthy foods.

Maintaining a healthy weight begins with the regulation of our daily intake of calories and is accomplished by engaging in an hour of physical activity per day. It should be common knowledge that a healthy diet consists of fruits, vegetables, nuts, and whole grains; just as it is common knowledge that smoking causes lung cancer. It is odd that a large portion of the obese population will not attempt to change their unhealthy habits until they are diagnosed with a life-altering disease or condition. If the cure to cancer were as simple as following a healthy diet and exercising regularly, doctors would have much more free time. People need to stop blaming obesity on the fast

food industry, because it is our own laziness and poor nutritional decisions that have caused the success and expansion of fast food chains. Even the strongest correlations between fast food sales and weight gain are not enough to deem the fast food industry responsible for America's obesity epidemic. The power is in our hands, not theirs.

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