

Current events: obesity

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



Obesity: An American Epidemic Americans are well aware of the fact that the United States has one of the world's highest rates of obesity and that the country has gained the worldwide stereotype of being overweight. This all pertains to the term that has been a coined phrase within American society for the past few years—the American obesity epidemic. Despite the widespread knowledge that being obese or overweight can negatively affect one's health, America's rates of obesity continue to climb. In addition, there are many Americans who claim that obesity is simply a controllable factor and that there is reason to refer to the obese population as an epidemic. They claim, in fact, that there is no such thing as an obesity epidemic; and that America's large percentage of people who are overweight is nothing to panic over or to consider as a dangerous plague. The fact is, however, obesity is quite a serious issue. Most recently in current events, it was stated that obesity has now surpassed smoking as the leading cause of preventable death in the United States of America. The smoking epidemic gained a great deal of publicity, leading to protest groups and awareness groups that all aimed to educate Americans about the health hazards associated with smoking; but now that obesity kills more people annually than smoking, it is clear that there is absolutely an obesity epidemic taking place within the United States and that it must be addressed, taken seriously, and combated through further education about health, fitness, and nutrition. It is quite absurd that so many American citizens still claim that the country does not have a problem with obesity, or that obesity is not a serious disease. Simply by looking back through America's history and how people have changed over the decades, it is obvious that standards have changed, along with

what is deemed as normal or average. Many people today are still unaware of how much the average American has grown and what the reasons are. Some like to argue that Marilyn Monroe-Hollywood's most famous sex symbol-was a size 14, so there is no reason why being considered a plus size in today's world should be a problem. What they fail to realize, however, is that clothing sizes have changed since the mid-20th century (Finkelstein and Zuckerman 2). A size 14 during Marilyn's day is actually more like a size eight according to today's size charts; and a size eight is a perfectly healthy, normal size. It seems as if Americans are trying to justify their growing waistlines so that they do not have to take responsibility for their own health and admit that the country has a problem with obesity. To admit that there is a problem, after all, suggests that there is a need for action so that a change may take place. Since obesity has everything to do with a person's lifestyle and their perspectives of health, combating the obesity epidemic will undoubtedly require a great deal of effort from all members of society. One of the main reasons why America has become increasingly overweight is because of a change in everything from lifestyle to poor habits. Ever since the introduction of the frozen TV dinner, America has come to value convenience over health. Considering that Americans tend to work more hours on average than those in most other countries, it only makes sense that quick meals or fast food would become popular choices in terms of their everyday diet. Unfortunately, the majority of convenient fast or frozen foods have little to no nutritional value, nor are they beneficial to anyone's health; yet they now make up a huge portion of American food culture. This is precisely why the obesity runs so deep within the United States and has

become such a widespread epidemic—the American way of life and everyday habits of the American people fuel the rise of obesity all around the country. Many parents, for example, will attempt to promote an active lifestyle to their children by signing them up for sports. After the games, however, it is not uncommon for other parents to bring after-game snacks such as cookies, chips, and sodas. This completely defeats the purpose of trying to raise one's child to value fitness and a healthy lifestyle; and oftentimes, parents who speak out against unhealthy snacks are viewed as uncooperative. One parent coaches her son's soccer team and makes it a point to limit the kids' snacks to water and orange slices, even though other parents insist on contributing sugary snacks to the list. This mom states, " I once had to tell a mom to put the powdered donuts and Juicy Juice back into her car. I told her what I tell the rest of the parents over and over—water turns out to be a pretty good way to hydrate your kids" (Finkelstein and Zuckerman 3). Why is this mother the odd one out amongst all other parents on her son's soccer team? It is because Americans, in general, do not take into consideration what they are feeding to their children; let alone what they are eating themselves. This lack of consciousness in terms of nutrition and health is a primary factor in America's obesity epidemic. It was not until the year 2000 that the media finally began to shed some light on the country's growing weight problems; but by this time, unhealthy habits have already been established as part of American culture. According to J. Eric Oliver, " The major medical journals, government health agencies, and even insurance experts... had been issuing warnings about the health risks of obesity since the 1950s. The idea that obesity was both sharply on the rise and associated

with many health problems was well known" (Oliver 39). Unfortunately, if the media is not going to dedicate its time to the coverage of obesity and warn people of a rising epidemic, nobody will pay attention. After decades of poor eating habits, it is obvious why the media's coverage on obesity today has not made much of an impact—not even when people began referring to obesity as a disease. There is still a debate as to whether or not obesity can actually be considered a disease, or if it strictly comes down to poor lifestyle choices. For example, if someone is overweight yet not obese, does that mean that they only have a little bit of the obesity disease or not at all? That is almost like saying that someone has cancer, but only a little bit. Referring to obesity as a disease, therefore, is not entirely accurate; but it is absolutely an American epidemic. Many people like to blame the obesity epidemic on politics and the media, saying that the only epidemic is the fact that more people are simply calling it one and labeling obesity as such; but consider the rapidly growing numbers of overweight and obese people in the country. Consider the growing number of obesity-related deaths that occur each year. It is not the pop culture term "obesity epidemic" that has created a fake idea of a widespread epidemic—it is the numbers and the growing death toll that has shown that obesity is, in fact, an epidemic that must be dealt with. If thousands of people are dying early deaths due to unhealthy lifestyles, then it is most certainly a problem that requires action. Although obesity, in and of itself, is not necessarily a disease, being obese puts individuals at a significantly higher risk of developing diseases that could be fatal. If obesity is the cause of so many of today's diseases—such as heart disease, fatty liver disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes—it is a clear epidemic that is

compromising the health of a large percentage of Americans. Some people prefer to call obesity a "trend" rather than an "epidemic", but a trend is when a habit or idea eventually goes out of style; but considering that since 1995, the percentage of obese Americans has risen from 16 percent to 27 percent, it is clear that more and more people are following an unhealthy lifestyle (Ungar). It is also important to keep in mind that this 27 percent of obese Americans does not include those who are overweight. If that population were factored in as well, the statistics are staggering. What is it that separates obese people from the overweight? It comes down to an individual's BMI, or body mass index. "People are classified as obese if they have a body mass index (a measure of height versus weight) of 30 or above. An index of 25 to 29.9 is considered overweight. Nationally, about two-thirds of American adults are too fat" (Ungar). That means that the majority of Americans are not at an ideal, healthy weight; and that number is much higher than it was only a few years ago. This gives evidence that the obesity rate is growing at an exponential rate, which is a key characteristic of any epidemic. In addition, those Americans who are overweight face the same types of health risks as those who are obese or morbidly obese. One does not have to be 100 pounds overweight in order to suffer the consequences of being too fat. The way in which obesity can potentially affect one's health is constantly overlooked. Many do not realize that morbid obesity, which means being 100 or more pounds overweight, puts people at 20 times more likely to develop diabetes; and a serious case of diabetes can lead to other health complications including amputations, blindness, kidney disease, cardiovascular disease, and a wide range of other infections (Finkelstein &

Zuckerman 11). Additionally, “ Obesity also greatly increases the risks of developing hypertension (high blood pressure) and high cholesterol... Together, the effects of excess fat, high cholesterol, and high blood pressure damage the cardiovascular system and may lead to a number of complications” (Finkelstein & Zuckerman 11). Essentially, obesity has the ability to negatively affect any area of the human body. From knee and back pains due to too much weight being put on the joints, to difficulty breathing at night, combating obesity has nothing to do with the visual appeal of a more slender and fit body—it has everything to do with saving people’s lives and encouraging them to regain control of their health. An even more frightening aspect of the obesity epidemic is its relation to the growing number of pregnancies each year. If more Americans each year are overweight or obese and the birth rate is steadily increasing, then there must be a connection between the obesity-related health risks of parents and the health of a mother’s pregnancy. One of the greatest obesity-related risks when it comes to becoming pregnant is that obese women are less likely to know they’re pregnant in a timely fashion—that is, several months can pass before they are aware that they are carrying a child. There have been many cases, in fact, when an obese woman had no idea she was ever pregnant, and then suddenly gave birth to her child nine months later. Why is this dangerous? When a mother is unaware that they are pregnant, they obviously will not adjust their current lifestyle so that their baby growing inside them will be healthy. If their lifestyles include unhealthy habits such as drinking or smoking, then the baby will undoubtedly be put at risk of complications such as fetal alcohol syndrome or medical concerns involving

second-hand smoke. Obesity, therefore, has proven to have a direct association to birth defects. According to one particular study, "... hospital readmissions are three times higher for children born to obese mothers. These children are also more likely to grow up to become obese adults and develop the [same] complications [as their mothers]" (Finkelstein and Zuckerman 12). Not only are many Americans teaching younger generations the same poor habits that lead to obesity and unhealthiness, but some babies are actually being born with obesity-related health setbacks. How can obesity simply be written off as a lifestyle choice that can easily be controlled, when infants all over the country are being born with complications due to their mother's obesity? Babies and children cannot control their own health if they are born with complications and then later conditioned to fuel their risk of obesity with poor eating habits and a lack of exercise. This is yet another example of how obesity is an epidemic—not all people have complete control of their health, and more children are being born into poor health circumstances. Perhaps one of the reasons why the positive message behind taking action against obesity gets misconstrued, or even ignored altogether, is because American society tends to focus more on the visual implications of being fat rather than the health consequences. Ironically, American society has had a sort of stigma against fat people long before obesity ever became an epidemic. While most people will typically associate prejudicial treatment with women or ethnic minorities, overweight people often face the same type of discrimination. According to Oliver, "America prides itself on being a land of equality, where all can succeed irrespective of their race, creed, sex, or other physical characteristics... And

yet there continues to be one group that is systematically mistreated throughout American society-fat people" (Oliver 60). Rather than realizing that being overweight compromises one's health, society would rather focus on the fact that thin people look better in bikinis. Discriminatory and negative views towards obese individuals, of course, are mostly due to the media and its coverage on fat people (Bailey 459). There are much more stories and television shows mocking obese people and creating negative stereotypes than there are educating society about the facts of obesity and how fighting obesity has everything to do with one's health instead of their appearance. It is not wonder why society has developed such a stigma against obese people when all types of media constantly depicts overweight individuals "... as gluttonous, lazy, or impotent" (Oliver 61). What is interesting is that characters on television or anywhere else in the entertainment industry do not even need to qualify as obese or overweight to be labeled as such. If Jessica Simpson gains ten pounds or if Tyra Banks no longer looks as thin as she was when she modeled for Victoria's Secret, people automatically begin to refer to them as " fat" or imply that they are not taking care of themselves. In reality, however, neither woman was ever at an unhealthy weight for their height or individual body type. While people may assume that America's prejudice against overweight people is completely independent of the current obesity crisis, it actually plays a role in perpetuating the cycle of obesity and promoting the habits that cause obesity to occur in the first place. One study aimed to determine whether or not obesity discrimination and mistreatment had any sort of effect on those who are overweight or obese. Many people believe that by taunting obese

people or blatantly pointing out that they are fat will inspire or motivate them to lose weight. The findings of this study, however, show that “ Stigma and discrimination toward obese persons are pervasive and pose numerous consequences for their psychological and physical health... Stigmatization of obese individuals threatens health, generates health disparities, and interferes with effective obesity intervention efforts” (Puhl and Heuer 1019). These results show that obesity discrimination actually leads to mental and emotional health issues, which could actually worsen the obesity crisis. Emotional eating and depression, for example, are very common causes of weight gain; and if a large portion of society is negatively criticizing those who are overweight, then it is undoing the positive efforts of medical and health professionals who are attempting to promote a healthy lifestyle. Due to American society’s lack of knowledge, not to mention their obsession with one’s physical appearance, it is easy to see why obesity has become such an epidemic. For everyone trying to make a positive impact on the obesity rates, there are several contributing negative aspects to the cause, bringing people’s focus to the cosmetic side of losing weight rather than concentrating on the health benefits of being fit. One of the main reasons why so many people refuse to believe that obesity is a true epidemic in the United States is because of the political implications that come along with it. Over the past decade, many obese individuals have resorted to blaming fast food joints such as McDonalds for their growing waistlines. These lawsuits eventually led to the House of Representatives passing an act known as “ The Cheeseburger Bill” so that people are prohibited to sue fast food restaurants or any other manufacturers of healthy food (Oliver 100). While

the underlying message behind these lawsuits was ultimately that Americans should not be eating fast food on a consistent basis and that it is unfortunate that fast food chains are such an enormous part of American pop culture, the way in which people went about spreading this message was flawed. It only lessened the credibility of the fight against unhealthy living, and sparked a wave of negative publicity for the overweight population, as they are now also stereotyped as people who fail to take responsibility for their unhealthy habits and would rather blame others. These lawsuits and those individuals who are unable to take responsibility for their own health, however, do not dismiss the fact that the growing number of overweight individuals in America is an epidemic. If it was not an epidemic, perhaps the country would have gained control over the situation by now. Another common belief amongst those who doubt obesity's credibility as a true epidemic is that the only reason why it is being defined as a problem is because of the media's messages that say women have to look a certain way. They believe that, due to these messages, people simply change their viewpoint about overweight individuals and now pay more attention to the obese population than they did in the past (Oliver 99). This argument, however, does not explain the statistics that show how more Americans are classified as obese every year. In America alone, at least two more states reach the point where at least one third of the population is classified as obese (Obesity in America). It is impossible to say that the only reason why people believe there is an obesity epidemic is because of the media. It does not matter that the image of ideal beauty has become so narrow due to what the media and the entertainment industry has deemed as physically attractive. This statement claims that

there have always been a large number of obese people in America, and it was only in recent years that society started singling them out; but according to nationwide statistics, it is clear that the obese population has risen drastically. Those numbers have absolutely nothing to do with the media or the fabrication of an obesity epidemic solely for the purpose of creating nationwide hysteria; and if the obesity epidemic was not a true problem, it would not be affecting one particular area of American society—the economy. What makes obesity an epidemic worthy of concern is the fact that it does not only negatively affect one's health, but it also takes a toll on the economy through high costs such as healthcare. Consider a group of employees, all obese, who work for a company that provides them with medical insurance. What if each of those employees developed an obesity-related disease that required them to take several prescription medications on a regular basis? This would entail higher costs for the company, not to mention the insurance company. It is no coincidence that the growing obesity population has a direct correlation with the rising prices in health care as well (Obesity in America). If the current obesity trend continues to increase, in fact, it is estimated that nearly 75 percent of the American population will be classified as obese by the year 2020 (Obesity in America). This does not even include those who are considered to be overweight and not at an ideal BMI. In addition to having nearly the entire country being overweight, researchers also believe that by the year 2020, the United States will be spending nearly four billion dollars on healthcare alone (Obesity in America). The country would not be spending so much money due to obesity if it was anything less than an epidemic. In addition to

healthcare costs, the money of American tax payers is also being used towards medical research (Barry et al. 10). As more people become either overweight or obese, it seems that more health concerns and diseases are constantly being linked to obesity. In order to verify the causes of these ailments, of course, doctors need to study this obesity epidemic in great detail; and research costs a great amount of money. Not only do tax payers and healthcare companies have to spend more money due to the obesity rates, but there are also greater costs for the obese individuals themselves. Fortunately for some, there is only a slight difference between the medical costs between people of a healthy weight and people who are obese—that is, as long as they are under the age of 30. Once someone is over 30 years of age, their medical costs shoot up drastically if they are considered to be obese, and even more so if they suffer from any obesity-related diseases such as diabetes (Finkelstein and Zuckerman 183). Since it has become more common for employers to reject a potential candidate for a job based on their weight, obesity has prevented many individuals across the United States from landing a position. Although it is ethically wrong to discriminate against a potential employee because of his or her weight, companies also need to keep in mind that obese people are also a liability; and they may incur extra insurance costs if they suffer from ailments due to their unhealthy weight. Regardless of what people speculate in regards to obesity, the main reason why it classifies as an epidemic is because people die every day from a cause having to do with being significantly overweight. While ailments such as heart disease has stereotypically been associated with members of high society, 80 percent of deaths due to heart disease are

people from poorer backgrounds; and since most of the obese population is of middle or lower class, it is clear that obesity accounts for nearly all current deaths from heart disease (Hossain). Obesity-related heart disease is becoming so common, that hospitals actually need to adjust their existing services so that they can accommodate the influx of heart disease patients. One positive aspect of heart disease is that " 80 percent of deaths from cardiovascular illness are preventable by modifying nine risk factors, including smoking, abnormal cholesterol, diabetes, high blood pressure, stress, abdominal obesity, sedentary lifestyle, eating too few fruits and vegetables and abstaining from alcohol" (Hossain). The fact that obesity is so preventable, however, is also what makes the large number of obesity-related deaths so tragic. It is quite peculiar how many doctors-whose advice people typically trust more than anyone else-do not inform more patients about how simple it can be to avoid health complications that are brought on by obesity. Approximately 40 percent of the American population spend the majority of their days sitting down, either at work or at home, and do not regularly exercise (Moore and Philips). Instead of simply telling their overweight patients to work out, however, many doctors write them a prescription. According to today's statistics, "... doctors continue to write more than 3. 4 billion prescriptions each year and mention medications during more than 70 percent of their office visits... [and] the vast majority of physicians are neither prescribing nor talking to their patients about the real wonder drug-exercise" (Moore and Philips). Consider how many Americans would not need to take any medications if they simply modified their current lifestyle. The numbers are staggering. Although the 3. 4 million prescriptions

that are given out do not pertain solely to obesity-related ailments, the majority of the medications are avoidable. The single most important fact that clearly proves that obesity is an epidemic is that, just this year, it has surpassed smoking as America's number one cause of preventable death. When one thinks of the many campaigns that were formed in order to advise people against smoking, it can be difficult to imagine obesity being even more of a threat to America's health. This is due in part to less Americans smoking on a regular basis, thus regaining a few years of their life expectancy; but as the New England Journal of Medicine shows, less people smoking is not the main reason why obesity is now the number one killer in America. Consider the example given by researchers below: Let's say obesity and smoking rates had held steady. In the case, an average 18-year-old would expect to gain about 2.98 years in life expectancy over a 15-year period, largely due to a 20% reduction in smoking over the past 15 years. But a 48% increase in obesity wiped that out. Instead of an increase of almost 3 extra years of life, the average 18-year-old can expect less than a year. (Wellsphere) This means that, because of obesity rates, it does not make much of a difference if the average person quit smoking, because their lifespan is still expected to be shorted due to the risk of obesity-related health complications. Not only is obesity shortening the lives of the average American, but it is also negating the health gain that one has when they quit another deadly habit such as smoking. The United States developed a strong aversion to smoking, because of the awareness that was spread in regards to the negative effects it had on one's health; and now the number of smoking Americans is slowly decreasing. It is imperative that the country now

recognize the obesity epidemic as a threat to people's health and take action so that the percentage of obese people in America can decrease as well.

There is no reason why Americans should not take the current news of obesity killing more people per annum than smoking seriously, nor should they insist that obesity is not actually an epidemic. If such an enormous portion of the population dies every year from health complications that could have been avoided if they were at a healthy weight, then how can people still claim that the obesity crisis is nothing but a mass epidemic created by politics and the media? The fact that the obesity population is increasing exponentially, that there is still a severe lack of awareness and education in terms of health, and that obesity is being passed down from generation to generation, only proves that obesity is a clear epidemic. Non-epidemics do not spread so quickly, root itself deeply in a country's culture, and cause the majority of a nation's annual deaths; and it is the potentially fatal consequences that obesity entails that shows how crucial it is that Americans take action against the obesity epidemic immediately. . Works Cited Bailey, Courtney. " Supersizing America: Fatness and Post-9/11 Cultural Anxieties." *Journal of Popular Culture* 43. 3 (2010): 441-62. Academic Search Premier. Web. 10 Oct. 2010. Barry, Colleen L., Victoria L. Brescoll, Kelly D. Brownell, and Mark Schlesinger. " Obesity Metaphors: How Beliefs about the Causes of Obesity Affect Support for Public Policy." *Milbank Quarterly* 87. 1 (2009): 7-47. Academic Search Premier. Web. 10 Oct. 2010. Finkelstein, Eric A., and Laurie Zuckerman. *The Fattening of America: How the Economy Makes Us Fat, If It Matters, and What to Do About It*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2008. Print. Hossain, Rajib. " Eliminating Inequities, Myths in Cardiac

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