

The environmental impacts of obesity



On our planet, there will always be some ongoing epidemic. History tells us of numerous medical epidemics, plagues, droughts and famine. In the past few decades a new epidemic has emerged; an epidemic that appears to run tandem with the consumption of fast food (Schlosser, 2001, p. 240). This new epidemic is obesity. Since the 1960s, the average adult weight has increased by approximately 24 pounds and in 2002, it was estimated that at least 65% of adults were overweight with more than 30% of those adults falling into the obese category (cited in Jacobson & McLay, 2006, p.). Sadly, obesity not only affects the individual.

The demand for larger quantities of food; larger clothing; larger cars has created a strain on the environment to produce these necessary resources. The rate of obesity is climbing as people consume more over-processed, artificially enhanced, convenience food. The demand for these cheat, easy foods is rising as is the demand for meat, worldwide. Author, Eric Schlosser wrote the following: By eating like Americans, people all over the world are beginning to look more like Americans, at least in one respect.

The United States now has the highest obesity rate of any industrialized nation in the world. (p. 240) With the growth of fast food giant, McDonalds, from approximately 3000 restaurants outside of the United States ten years ago, to currently more than 17, 000 restaurants in 120 foreign countries (Schlosser, p. 229), the increased demand for meat production is evidently a worldwide phenomenon. Currently, livestock production is growing more rapidly than any other agricultural division worldwide (Sapp & McDonald, 2001, p.). The production of livestock not only requires large amounts of food, water, land, chemicals, and electrical energy; the USDA reports that

livestock cycled through the U. S. for meat production produce 61 million tons of waste each year. This is approximately 130 times the volume of human waste (cited in Sapp & McDonald, 2001, p. 3). Livestock waste can contaminate our rivers and ground water and reduce the amount of dissolved oxygen in water which can cause the extinction of water organisms.

Since livestock emit carbon dioxide, methane and ammonia in their manure, it can be said that livestock have, “ significantly contributed to the increased levels of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases during the past 250 years” (Sapp & McDonald, 2001, p. 6). From this information one could be lead to believe that since obesity is on the rise and obese people eat more food, the increase in food production and its negative effects on the environment, including global warming, are directly related to human obesity. The increase in food production to feed our growing population comes with heavy environmental consequences.

As the demand for food increases, so does the use of fertilizers and pesticides. Soil erosion and degradation from livestock overgrazing have lead to a decline of soil fertility (Sapp & McDonald, 2001, p. 9). The planets natural resources are be depleted more than ever before due to the demand of an overweight culture. Soil quality is not the only area being affected. According to Tina Peng of Newsweek (2008), vehicles used to transport obese people, such as cars and airplanes, burn more fuel to ferry heavier passengers.

This not only leads to higher costs for the obese, such as having to purchase two seats on an airplane; it creates a greater demand for fuel. The increased amount of fuel consumed by passenger vehicles because of the increased size of passenger's leads to higher amounts of fuel being consumed (Jacobson & McLay, 2006, p. 1). It should be noted, however, that the majority of fuel used by passenger vehicles is to transport the vehicle itself. Still, this increased fuel consumption has serious environmental effects, including an increase in greenhouse gas pollution, primarily from CO₂ and increased air pollution.

A 2006 study conducted by Sheldon Jacobson and Laura McLay and featured in *The Engineering Economist*, highlights the correlation between increased fuel consumption by passenger vehicles and the rising obesity rate in America. In this study they state, Although the amount of fuel consumed due to the rising prevalence of obesity is small compared to the increase in the amount of fuel consumed due to other factors, such as increased vehicle usage and an overall increase in the number of drivers, in absolute terms, it still represents a large amount of fuel, and will become even more significant as the rate of obesity increases. p. 2)

Therefore, the demand for fuel for food production and processing, plus increased fuel for human transportation, results in a greater demand for oil production. Approximately 40% of crude oil barrels used in the United States daily is for passenger vehicles (cited in Jacobson & McLay, 2006, p. 1).

Though opinions vary, crude oil harvesting does place, at least, some negative toll on the global environment. Now that the link between obesity and environmental depletion is more apparent; what should be done?

<https://assignbuster.com/the-environmental-impacts-of-obesity/>

Perhaps, with the knowledge that obesity, like smoking, hurts everyone, overweight individuals will have more incentive to lose weight.

Unfortunately, if smoking is any indication, many obese people will either not care about their impact on the environment or they may feel paranoid and defensive. Not to mention that promoting individually portioned, non-recyclable diet food will also negatively impact the environment. The nation is swarming with programs and companies professing the solution for weight loss.

But for weight loss to be environmentally friendly, one must implement a nutrition-based plan of action. A small handful of well-established companies provide nutritionally sound meal alternatives in multi-usage, recyclable containers. Pair that with professional nutrition counseling and many people will lose weight effectively and safely. Since weight loss is such an important activity to embrace, a lifestyle change to include proper nutrition, moderate exercise and a positive outlook will not only help the overweight population but the world population as well.

Using bicycles or walking to a destination will not only have positive effects on personal health, it will also have positive effects on the environment by the reduction of greenhouse gases. By changing one's diet to include whole grains, low sugar fruits and vegetables, lean proteins and non-hydrogenated oils for spreads and cooking, a 'dieter' can eat healthier and lose weight. Also, by avoiding the pre-packaged meal plans, we can cut down on food waste and take charge of our own nutrition. A healthy, eco-friendly lifestyle is not only for the overweight.

Since many, so called fit, people have serious underlying health problems; we should all do our part to be healthier for ourselves and for our world. Cutting down on meat consumption will eventually reduce the demand for livestock and slow degradation and pollution of our soil and water. If the demand for meat goes down, then it is assumed that the demand for fruits and vegetables will increase. Though livestock and vegetable farming are different, there must be a benefit in using our natural resources for a more traditionally natural farming.

By eliminating one trip a week to a fast food restaurant we will not only improve our health and reduce waste proliferated by hamburger wrappers, to-go bags and french fry cups; we will also cut down on CO2 emissions. Driving smaller, more fuel efficient and low emission vehicles will help reduce greenhouse gas levels. Obviously, smaller vehicles are not ideal for everyone, but the appeal for these vehicles must be glorified in advertising. Every American does not need to have a sport utility vehicle or a large pickup truck.

Consumers are beginning to shift toward the smaller vehicle which is a positive approach to our global crisis. As a citizen of this planet, I have observed that obesity is prevalent. However, I do not expect the burden of change to fall solely on those who, for whatever reason, are not of ideal weight. Though, technically, we should know better; some blame must be laid upon manufacturers of unhealthy foods and on non-recyclable, convenience packaging. Some blame should also be shared by corporations concerned only with their bottom-line, who market such foods heavily.

Ignoring all of the problems associated with obesity will not help. But we must be careful with accusations. Though the obesity epidemic has devastated the environment and the health of society, it is not up to the obese alone to correct the problem. Education and support are needed to help all obese societies to stop the gluttony, adopt a new lifestyle and make the world a healthier place for everyone to live and thrive. Rather than laying blame on one sect in society, let the people of the world come together as a global society and take larger steps for a healthier planet.