

# Obesity: causes, effects and treatments



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## Abstract

Looking at the scope of obesity it is complex and often left with quick judgment. The purpose of this discussion is to look at the qualifications of obesity to be listed as a disease; the impact of the disease (such as cost, statistics, etc.), the behavioral-cognitive aspect, and resolution to the disease. Findings were from journals or the Center for Disease Control. Prior to the research I viewed obesity as a voluntary disease that could be fixed with getting off the couch. During the research of many web-based articles, journals, videos, and statistics I am now on the other side of the fence. Those individuals with obesity are in this situation for a variety of reasons. It would be of more help to support them and raise awareness of the disease and how it is affected behaviorally, environmentally, and from a change in corporate standards.

## Introduction

A growing epidemic in America and Western civilization is one that is self-inflicted. Obesity is defined as having a BMI of 29.5 or higher. Based on your height and weight a BMI is often used to determine a person's level of physical health. There has been a growing trend of those considered overweight (BMI 24.5-28.5) or obese in the United States. More recently there have been heavy debates over the classification of obesity being considered a disease. Disease can be defined as an illness that affects a person, animal, or plant: condition that prevents the body or mind from working (Webster). A research study as listed by the CDC states that as “

weight increases to levels of overweight or obesity the risks of the following also increase: Coronary Heart Disease, Type 2 Diabetes, Cancer, Hypertension, Dyslipidemia, stroke, liver and gallbladder disease, sleep apnea, and respiratory problems, osteoarthritis, and gynecological problems." As we increase in weight we tend to develop serious health problems. And by referring to the definition of disease we can see that disease can occur or correlate with obesity.

### Definition of Disease

What exactly does the word disease mean? We hear the word frequently. And think in concrete terms of disease as a terrible shortcoming that grapples at the lives of so many undeserving or seemingly healthy individuals. Most people don't look at a person with a disease in disgust. Or in angst, or shame them. Disease is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as, " an illness that affects a person, animal, or plant: a condition that prevents the body or mind from working normally". So by definition we can consider the controversial classification of obesity as a disease. The controversy surrounding classifying obesity as a disease rests on the thought that those who are obese can help themselves. Those obese individuals inflicted this upon themselves and so therefore the term disease doesn't apply. However, comparing the term disease and looking at the qualifications of having a disease, obesity does apply. By having obesity you become at risk for a variety of other diseases or overall health problems.

### Pathological Impact

Obesity rates among American's and the western world have been rising with exponential growth. In the United States about one-third of U. S. adults (35. 7%) are obese and about 12. 5 million of children and adolescents are considered obese (CDC). There are many factors in these numbers. Some variables are but not limited to socio-economic status, racial differences, job or career, level of education, and location. Those with a low socio-economic status appear to have greater obesity rates. This is impacted by the affordability of fast-food that offers a meal for a couple of dollars. In comparison a healthy, more nutritious meal could cost an additional \$5. 00. Obesity related diseases can cause heart disease, stroke, type II diabetes, high blood pressure, etc. (CDC). Aging also impacts higher rates of obesity due to the hormonal and biological changes that take place over time. Mortality rates also seem to be higher for those who are obese and have obesity related diseases.

### Disabling Obesity

An on-going debate in obesity is can these individuals be considered handicapped, and what does it mean to be handicapped. In a study, 2008 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, obesity rates are 58% higher for than adults without disability. And obesity rates for children with disabilities are 38% higher than for children without disabilities. Annual health care costs of obesity that are related to disability are estimated at approximately \$44 billion (CDC). By these numbers it is noticeable that there is a correlation between disability and obesity. The term disability can be described as, a physical or mental condition that limits a person's movements, senses, or activities (Merriam-Webster). By definition obese

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individuals would or could be considered disabled by their own inflictions. However, not all are eligible for the right to receive Social-Security Disability. Those with a BMI over 40 are considered morbidly obese. This category of people tends to have the biggest impact on their organs and organ systems. Moreover, there seems to be more that meets the eye with obesity trends. While in most cases it is self-inflicted there are a number of people that have a genetic predisposition or thyroid problems. Or they are on medications for another disorder that impacted their weight gain.

In the famous case of *Cook v. Rhode Island*, the courts ruled in favor of a 300lb female, Bonnie Cook, who took to the courts to protect her against discrimination of not being hired due to being obese. The court initially ruled in favor of her potential employer but the jury sided with Cook. So the state took the case to appeals court where they lost their battle protecting the possibility of discriminating against obese applicants. The court stated, "... voluntariness is not a criterion for determining whether a person is disabled or perceived to be disabled." (Cordes1994). New ground was broken by the proclamation of disability and obesity being joined together and protected together. The statements went further, " Voluntariness only comes into play if the condition can be easily controlled by the person..." (Cordes 1994). The impact of disease obesity can cause is not a light subject or to be sought as laziness through and through. There is good reason for obese individuals to be given protection.

Responsibility of Employers

Another large debate in the issues and impacts of obesity is the responsibility of employer's. Especially for those whose obesity comes from a sedentary lifestyle. Or perhaps need the preventative measures of keeping obesity at bay. A hot topic on the rise is whether or not employers should be mandated to give employees a work-out period in their schedule. The employers could offer employee's incentives for utilizing resources (a company gym, discounted memberships, and dietician, walking a company track) and by using the resources keep costs low. Though initially it could be costly to take on the responsibility to offer extra incentives to employee's it could offer long term potential savings. (Villareal, Apovian, Kushner, and Klein 2005) Those whose companies offer various programs and actively engage in them express more happiness, productivity, a greater quality of life, and overall better health. Better health allows for employee's to serve their employers better. They use less sick pay, keep insurance premiums low, and are more likely to be in tune with their daily job. So while the initial cost may be high, the long term financial gain of a happy, healthy, productive team is hard not to invest in!

### Responsibility of Citizens

Those who are overweight and obese not only impact themselves but they also impact their peers and fellow citizens. The responsibility of American's to help those who are suffering from obesity is absent. This is understandable, considering we are not responsible for the actions of others. However, change arrives when other's no longer stand idly by watching suffering. Those who suffer from addictions or psychiatric abnormalities experience greater success in getting back on track when they have a

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support group. The more awareness that is raised on the disease of obesity the better society can understand it. Understanding can be in noting that obese individuals are not just self-indulgent lazy people. Most experience other health problems. For some this may include a behavioral or cognitive issue that led them to the weight gain. Or the obesity can be from side effects of medication. (Latzer, Y., & Stein, D. 2013) The better we educate ourselves and others on the obesity epidemic the faster we can assist them to a healthier lifestyle.

### Cost of Obesity

The less healthy American's are, we all pay the price. According to a study in 2008 the annual medical cost of obesity was \$147 billion dollars (CDC). This amount spent on health care costs of a disease is breath-taking. And this is just in health care costs. The \$147 billion spent annually related to medical costs of obesity does not include time spent out of work, time spent going to the appointments, the extra costs to the families affected by obesity, or worse it doesn't include the mental cost. Adolescents who are obese experience a greater amount of psychological and social problems. Often (obesity) is linked to the numerous absences from school and is thought to be one of the main reasons for poor performance (Latzer, Y., & Stein, D. (2013)). It is also reported that lower IQ scores from children translate into obesity in adulthood (Latzer, Y., & Stein, D. (2013)). The data proves that the cost of obesity is not merely short-term. But the disease continues to impact those afflicted during obesity and post obesity.

### Behavioral-Cognitive Aspect

The reasons for procuring obesity or an unhealthy lifestyle is often looked at through the behavioral-cognitive perspectives. Behaviorists feel that the bad habits of obese individuals can be unlearned with the right treatment. On the basis that (increased engagement in sedentary activities and overeating) are learned (A. Tamlyn Shields 2009). Moreover they intend for alternate behaviors and encourage a healthier lifestyle (A. Tamlyn Shields 2009). Increasingly, adults and children are more tuned into technology and less in tuned with the outside world. The undying interest in technology leads to a more sedentary lifestyle coupled with high caloric foods. Where individuals should compensate for their inactivity by decreasing their caloric intake, quite the opposite seems to occur. Fattier foods that can be purchased on the go or take little effort to make are easier to consume. In addition to the fact that these foods are overloaded with sugar that act on our brains like a drug. Sugary foods activate the reward system in our brain allowing for a small flood of dopamine to be released. This in turn excites our body and we are left wanting more of the euphoria these foods bring (N. Volkow & R. Wise, 2005).

### Resolving the Problem

Trying to undo what has been done to so many American's by the way of obesity is not an easy task. It at least will require self-determination. While determination of those afflicted may sound easy, it certainly is not. Some ways we can assist are through offering consistent support and intervention for them to seek a combination of behavioral, medical, and physical assistance. With the three, obesity can be reduced by pinpointing the origin of weight gain (medication, health problems, depression, anxiety, and

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addiction). In addition to mediating with a behaviorist, and ending by increasing physical activity. However, it would be of great assistance to hold businesses more accountable for what they put in the foods they produce. To offer consumers a better, wholesome product would increase profits and company morale. For example the average soda contains about ten of sugar. The American Heart Association states that men should allow up to nine teaspoons of sugar and woman should allow for six teaspoons of sugar a day. Considering the breakfast cereal Honey-Nut Cheerio's contains about 8.25 teaspoons of sugar before adding the milk. Our daily limit is almost reached before we finish eating breakfast. While sugar is not the only culprit to substantial weight gain it does inspire other health problems. Though it is the consumer's responsibility to monitor what they put in their own body, it would be of great assistance to hold companies accountable for better products. For many families grabbing a \$5.00 hot-n-ready large pizza in less than ten minutes beats spending \$20.00 in groceries and forty-five minutes in cooking time. The fast-food industry spent in 2012 \$4.6 billion dollars in advertising (Yale News). If companies spent the same amount on promoting healthier options and producing healthier products it would make a large impact on obesity in the U. S. The initial cost may be higher but perhaps we can apply the behavioral perspective and 'unlearn' these business practices. Eventually supply and demand would bring the healthier options to a lower cost to produce and consume. While saving many lives and reenergizing American enterprise and American citizens.

## Conclusion

Obesity rates have sky-rocketed in the past twenty years in the United States. Approximately 34.9% of all adults and about 12.5 million children and adolescents are afflicted by obesity (CDC). The prevalence of obesity related disabilities cost the health care system approximately \$44 billion dollars annually (CDC). Obesity is defined as having a BMI of 29.5 or higher and is associated with inducing secondary diseases and illnesses that are not always irreversible. The impacts of the disease (or diseases) can afflict suffers with mental illnesses (anxiety, low confidence, depression,) or poorer IQ as children. Combining these together can produce a lower socio-economic status and inspire other problems related to that. Such as housing, careers, quality of life, financial troubles, that is hard to bring oneself out of alone. By offering support or putting together organizations coupled with self-determination we can assist those with obesity. Combined with employer incentives, mediation, and increased physical activity along with reduction in high caloric foods the rates of obesity and obesity related illnesses could drop.

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