

# Obesity and Culture in America

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American society and culture has deviated substantially from that of the traditions of the rest of the world, which has led to an epidemic of obesity. Through the years, society has loosely defined obesity as a person who is considerably overweight. The Center for Disease Control, also known as the CDC, has defined the term scientifically using the body mass index rating. According to the CDC, the body mass index rating, known as BMI, defines anyone with a BMI rating of thirty or higher as obese. According to a recent study conducted by the center, more than thirty three percent of American citizens are currently classified as obese. This study portrays a shocking statistic of public health. The data recorded shows a considerable change for the worse over the past twenty years. An even more alarming trend however, which has become increasingly more apparent, is the sharp rise of obesity in children. Childhood obesity grows on average about a full percent every year (as cited in Schwimmer, 2005). The CDC estimates that by 2010, nearly twenty percent of children in the United States will be obese (*Defining Overweight and Obesity*, 2007).

What are the primary causes of obesity in America?

Many have suggested that the blame for obesity lies squarely on the shoulders of the fast food industry. The fast food industry most certainly lacks quality nutritious food at most popular franchise chains. In the past, restaurants such as McDonalds, Burger King, KFC, as well as others, have lacked proper nutritional disclosure and healthy food options on their menu (Terry Kerrigan, 2009). There appears however, to be much more to this than simply the availability of cheap and nutrient-lacking food. It is simply too easy for society to blame the fast food industry for the obesity endemic.

After all, are not the problems in society always someone else's fault?

For many Americans, this is what people have often been led to believe. Society and the public consumer has for quite some time, lacked the ability to take responsibility for their own actions. It certainly does not require an aeronautical engineering propulsion degree to realize that a cheeseburger is going to be considerably less healthy than a salad with low calorie dressing. It has instead become increasingly apparent that this epidemic is caused more by the cultural consumer standards we set, rather than exclusively by the types of foods we eat.

Several decades ago, the food consumption culture in America was fairly similar to the way other modern world cultures actually still are today. In many cultures, and specifically those in Latin America and Western Europe, the average typical family mealtime routine was culturally similar. Most Europeans and Latin Americans start the day with a small to medium sized breakfast. This meal would kick-start the body's metabolism and provide enough energy until lunchtime. For those cultures, lunch is typically the largest meal of the day. The lunch time would start around 1:00PM to 2:00PM in the afternoon and consist of what Americans would now often eat for dinner; a carbohydrate-rich meal. Lunch therefore provided the majority of the energy the human body needed for the remainder of the work day. Dinner would then typically be served late in the evening. With the exception of special occasions and holidays, dinner usually consisted of mostly proteins and vegetable items. Few, if any starches or heavy carbohydrate-rich foods would be served. A typical dinner might include fish, chicken breast, or some other type of meat protein. This is then accompanied by some vegetables, a salad, and occasionally a protein-rich soup. This would provide the much needed nutrients for repairing and maintaining the human body's various systems in sleep.

Consequently, a typical modern day American meal schedule follows a somewhat different routine. In an otherwise ideal situation, most Americans would eat a very small breakfast. However, lunchtime would start much earlier in the day, and last only an hour. The typical lunch for most Americans would be of slightly higher than average proportions. Dinner, however, would be the biggest meal of the day. This is the unfortunate routine of what the American culture has adopted over time. In the past twenty or so years, this routine has become significantly problematic for many Americans. Unfortunately, many Americans skip breakfast altogether; their only source of nutrients consisting of the creamer and sugar that is mixed in their morning coffee. With this lack of solid sustenance for breakfast, the human body's metabolism typically remains relatively inactive. This behavior can lead to snacking, which usually results in the consumption of prepackaged trans-fat rich foods. According to Elisabetta Politi of the Duke Diet and Fitness Center at Duke University, this snacking is referred to as "starvation eating." She explains, "When you don't eat breakfast, you're actually fasting for 15 to 20 hours, so you're not producing the enzymes needed to metabolize fat to lose weight" (as cited in Davis, 2005).

Because many Americans do not eat breakfast, lunch times are typically earlier: as early as 11:30AM to noon in most cases. The meal usually consists of unhealthy, cholesterol and sodium-rich foods. Dinners often consist of the same kinds of unhealthy foods as consumed during lunchtime, and are frequently of massive proportions. In many cases, dinner becomes the largest meal of the day in America. The exceptional problem to this is that many people go to sleep within a short period of time after eating dinner. During sleep, the human body simply does not need copious amounts of carbohydrates

and saturated fat since the body is at rest. The body instead needs primarily proteins, some fat, vitamins, and minerals. This poor schedule of eating is often exacerbated by the types of jobs and careers the majority hold in America. Many consumers work full time jobs and compound this problem by frequently eating at restaurants or by bringing home calorie heavy, and saturated fat rich take-out food.

Societal work practices have also had an enormous impact on America's ability to maintain a healthy weight. Through the direction the economy and society has taken in the past few decades, America now has fewer manufacturing jobs. The country's major exports have primarily become service oriented in nature. This means the majority of American jobs and careers result in workers remaining stationary at desks for eight to ten hours per day. This lack of activity means the average worker and employee is burning fewer calories, while at the same time consuming more. If a fairly active construction worker certainly does not need the massive calories in a super-sized, "Double Quarter Pounder with Cheese Value Meal," then a sedentary computer programmer most definitely does not.

Obviously, the foods people eat do play a large part in the sheer numbers of obese consumers in America. In nearly every other country in the world, consumers buy groceries more frequently and in smaller quantities. It is typical for most people in Europe to buy their groceries once every two days, if not daily. These foods are then used to provide meals for that same day, or the very next. Americans on the other hand, purchase foods in vast quantities. This is known as buying in bulk. Since the dawn of the supermarket's creation, Americans have become accustomed to purchasing larger and larger refrigerators. Americans in general have the largest refrigerators and freezers of

any country's typical family unit in the entire world. A more recent trend now is the idea of a galley kitchen. This trend encourages many new middle and upper class homes to be designed and built to include the largest refrigerator possible. If that was not enough of an excess, grocery stores in America are also three times the size of the typical grocery store in Europe.

Unfortunately, this cycle only increases other bad consumption habits. Since foods that are purchased in bulk must last substantially longer, they are often less healthy as well. Much of the foods that Americans buy at the grocery store are produced at geographically distant farms. These farms have purposely perfected the science of mass production in the smallest area possible, in an effort to maintain market competitiveness. This is often accomplished through genetic engineering and through the use of chemical-rich fertilizers or pesticides. While genetic engineering in itself has not been proven to cause negative repercussions in the human body, fertilizers and pesticides used on produce have. Additionally, some foods purchased at states-side grocery stores are often specially made to last a substantial amount of time. This is to facilitate easier freezer storage, and for quick preparation. One example of these kinds of quick foods is a frozen TV dinner. Pre-packaged foods such as frozen TV dinners are loaded with unusually high levels of sodium. A frozen TV dinner might contain five or six times the amount of sodium as the same meal that was prepared fresh. Many pre-packaged meals also contain numerous chemical preservatives. Two specific common chemicals are butylated hydroxyanisole and butylated hydroxytoluene; also known as BHA and BHT. These two chemicals preserve food by acting sacrificially to the other ingredients. BHA and BHT are antioxidants which react first to the oxygen exposed to the foods. Similar to a

sacrificial anode rod on a battleship's steel hull, this reaction allows the food to last longer by preventing the oxidization of the fats. This prevents the foods from spoiling and gives them a substantially longer shelf life (Helmenstine, 2009). Several of these chemicals have also been linked in laboratory studies to cause carcinogenic activity in laboratory animals, which often suggests it may also cause the same results in humans.

The unhealthy eating habits in America show absolutely no sign of recession or improvement. With the growing number of obese and overweight in America, there is a chance the entire population of The United States could become overweight within the next decade. The current trend shows sixty seven percent of Americans are ranked as overweight, and many are at the threshold of obesity (*Obesity and Overweight*, 2009). Chances of developing illnesses such as heart disease, type-2 diabetes, in addition to reproductive and psychological disorders are all exacerbated by an obese condition (Lee, 2009). Obesity can and will cause medical premiums in America to sky rocket if this endemic is left unchallenged. As a society, America must learn to return to a healthier eating lifestyle and not one of detrimental excess.

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