



Overweight? Who, Me?

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Experts say Americans are getting fatter at an alarming rate, yet many people may be in denial. A national study that measured people's height and weight found that almost two-thirds of them are overweight, with almost 30 percent obese and at seriously increased health risk. At the same time, in a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) survey relying on self-reported height and weight, slightly less than 20 percent met the same criteria for obesity.

According to the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), the finding that almost one out of three adults is obese is news. In the period between 1988 and 1994, 23 percent were obese. In 1960, just 13 percent were obese.

The number of people overweight but not obese has increased only slightly through the years. But because of the recent boom in obesity, we now have almost double the number of overweight and obese adults as those who are not overweight. Back in the 1988-1994 period, it was almost even, with a little over half the population meeting standards for excess weight.

Americans are not alone in facing what is being called an epidemic of obesity. Although they seem to be largely leading the pack, some Europeans are facing an increasing problem, too. For example, the rate of obesity in England has doubled since 1980. Current studies from individual nations show obesity in 10 to 20 percent of European men and 10 to 25 percent of European women. In Japan, obesity in men has doubled since 1982, although that still leaves less than two percent of the men obese.

The dramatic increase in obesity over the last 40 years (or even the last 15) suggests that lifestyle changes are responsible. People who might have maintained a healthy weight with the lifestyle of yesteryear have now moved into the overweight category, a result of today's less than ideal eating habits. The same choices have caused those who may have been overweight in the past to become obese.

Increased obesity is escalating health problems and health care costs. High blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease and several forms of cancer are all linked to obesity. One study estimates that \$102.2 billion was spent on obesity-related diseases in 1999.

Recognizing the link between obesity and both cancer risk and overall health, the American Institute for Cancer Research recommends a three-pronged approach to reverse this explosion of obesity. First, we need to make a conscious choice to be active daily. Technology has reduced the physical energy needed for most household chores and many occupations, and the hours spent with computers, television and video games means our leisure activity is more passive than in years past. We need to compensate for this new lifestyle with some form of active recreational activity, more walking or other exercise.

Second, we need to reduce our portion sizes. Third, we need to change our food choices to better match our needs. French fries and cookies never were "health food," and now, people eat them in much larger portion sizes. Years ago, 64-ounce (or even 24-ounce) bottles of soda or juice would never have been considered an individual serving, and they shouldn't be now. Eating on the run also makes balanced eating, with plenty of fruits and vegetables, a challenge. The lack of more healthful foods, plus the increase in far less nutritious foods in super-sized portions, hurts far more than our weight.

If you need help to improve your eating habits and prevent weight gain, *Shape Your Future...Your Weigh!*[™] can help. Contact your base Health and Wellness Center (HAWC) or Dietitian for more information.