

Joel P. Barbour, Student Participant  
Gilbert High School, Iowa

## The Obesity Epidemic in America

The American way of life has been subject to scrutiny over the past few years. Americans have earned the reputation of working far too many stressful hours, not getting sufficient exercise, and indulging in diets rich in all the things that should not be eaten. This “on the go” lifestyle has created numerous health problems that the American population faces today, the most prevalent of which are obesity and malnutrition. The two are paradoxically related, because unbalanced diets cause our bodies to be malnourished and lacking the essential vitamins and minerals our bodies crave, while excesses in other nutritional areas cause our bodies to store surplus in fat deposits throughout the body. Experts say that obesity is an “epidemic” sweeping across the nation and destroying our quality of life. This plague has worked its way into nearly 30.5 percent of the population, a number that has been rising at an alarming speed over recent years. The situation in America is quite different from many other countries, however. America as a whole has comparatively few hunger issues caused by poverty compared to other less developed countries. In fact, America is one of the richest and most capable countries when it comes to feeding its population. According to the 2000 census, approximately 63.9 percent of Americans over the age of 16 are in the workforce; earning money and providing for families. Only 9.2 percent of American families are below the poverty level; but these families are greatly assisted by government aid such as welfare and countless private charities, food centers, and housing programs that help needy families get food and other support necessary to subsist. If America is so well off, then why is obesity about to overtake smoking as the leading cause of health problems, many ask. The answer is the American lifestyle. Long working hours, high stress environments, unbalanced diets, lack of sleep, and insufficient exercise are just a few reasons why obesity is an increasing threat to Americans.

One major issue with America’s epidemic is the unfamiliar language that goes along with nutrition and obesity. Two commonly misused words are overweight and obese. These terms can be very easily misused, as 127 million Americans are overweight, while 60 million are obese. Both terms are used to classify the condition of someone whose weight is greater than what experts consider healthy for a given height. To determine if one is overweight or obese, a system has been developed that utilizes the height of the individual against his or her weight, to determine their body mass index, or BMI. An adult with a BMI of 25 to 29.9 is considered overweight, while an adult with a BMI over 30 is considered obese. Both conditions are very serious, often causing many problems to a person’s health.

To understand the problem, one needs to picture the average American family. According to the United States Census Bureau, the average family size is 3.14 people. Out of the American population, approximately 30.5 percent of the population is obese. This means that on average at least one person in our typical American family suffers from obesity. However, studies have shown that one family member’s problems can have an effect on the rest of the family. According to the American Obesity Association, there is a greater risk of obesity to children whose parents are obese. This is quite an alarming fact, because it shows that obesity could continue to grow and adversely affect lives.

The real threat from obesity does not come from being overweight, but from the numerous health problems associated with being overweight. Some of the most common health risks are diabetes, numerous cardiovascular diseases, hypertension, respiratory problems, arthritis, psychological problems, and a poor quality of life. In most cases, however, these problems can be remedied in many ways. Small amounts of weight loss, such as 10 percent of a person’s body weight, can drastically turn around one’s overall health. Increased exercise can cause great changes in someone’s health, and help the immune system function more efficiently preventing common viruses and sickness. A balanced diet can

immediately turn around health by letting organs function properly and by using nutrition to make energy instead of storing fat.

There are many common misconceptions about how people become obese. Obesity does not develop from one single cause. Instead, many factors are involved in being overweight or obese. The actual fat deposits usually start from a poorly balanced diet, usually high in fats, oils, sugars, and starches. These “unwanted” nutrients are commonly found in America’s fast food restaurants. These “on the go” restaurants provide efficient meals for their patrons, but the food typically consists of poor ingredients that greatly contribute to an unbalanced diet. The rest of the diet is usually lacking essential vitamins, minerals, and amino acids that help our bodies process the excess fats. The body interprets this excess as a time of plenty, and automatically stores the fats in deposits all over the body to be used at a later time. This is simply nature’s way of storing up for the harder times that are sure to come, and there is no way to stop one’s body from storing the fats. The fat-storing process can be assisted by other issues, including a person’s living environment, genetics, and hormones. All of these can contribute to your body’s storing of fats for energy, making it easier to become overweight or obese.

One new idea that has recently developed is the importance of maintaining a balanced blood sugar. As Americans, we commonly focus on “good tasting” rather than “good for me,” so we tend to reach for the foods high in sugar. Recent studies show that maintaining a steady blood sugar level is a key element to good health. One’s blood sugar determines how much of what you eat goes to make energy, and the rest goes to be stored in your body’s fat deposits. If people keep controlled blood sugar levels (with less reliance on carbonated beverages), their bodies can more efficiently use their food, therefore controlling weight.

There is a common thought in American society that we Americans are obese because we are overfed; when the fact of the matter is that many Americans actually suffer from malnutrition. Many people think that malnutrition simply means “going hungry because of a lack of food.” They usually associate malnutrition with poverty-stricken areas such as Africa. However, this is far from the truth. In reality many Americans are suffering from malnutrition and are obese at the same time. The root of the problem is an unbalanced diet. Their bodies are not getting enough of certain nutrients that are essential to living. It is frustrating to know that in a country with a median family income of \$50,046 that many people who are more than capable of properly feeding themselves simply do not.

Everyone knows that exercise is needed in order to maintain health, but millions of Americans do not get the daily exercise that their bodies need. Exercise can benefit a person in many ways; however, 55 percent of Americans do not get the recommended 30 minutes a day, four days a week. Getting the proper amount of exercise will benefit a person in countless ways. One very important change that exercise causes is an increase in the metabolic rate, causing one to burn more fat and calories. Physical exertion releases endorphins into one’s bloodstream which causes a euphoric feeling of happiness or pleasure. Exercise can also make a person feel more confident about them self, and the way they look. Exercise is a pivotal element to being healthy and maintaining a healthy weight, and it is obvious that Americans as a whole are not devoting enough time to exercising. With just 30 minutes four times per week, Americans could take a giant step towards reducing or preventing obesity.

There are some misconceptions that the 30 minutes of exercise must mean working out until you can’t walk anymore, but that is far from the truth. In reality, simple tasks such as yard work, playing with children in the backyard, or going for a short walk will suffice. It is not necessary to climb mountains in order to maintain a healthy weight; all that is required is an increase in one’s heart rate in order to burn extra calories. It is not necessary to join a trendy health club or try the newest workout routine; the same results can be attained through everyday tasks and simple workouts such as pushups and sit-ups. It is

much easier to prevent obesity through regular exercise than to try to lose the extra weight when already obese.

In the fast-paced American lifestyle, stress is a daily occurrence. Stress can be caused from normal daily activities such as work, school, family, and friends. Stress does not directly cause obesity; however, the various ways in which people deal with stress can. It is very common for people to deal with daily problems or stress by consuming large amounts of food. The American culture has developed food as a comfort, and millions of people seek relief from daily life in the form of food. This is a very unhealthy way for people to deal with their problems because of the numerous health risks that can accompany overeating and binge eating. People need to find a healthier alternative to dealing with stress, such as a form of exercise. When dealt with correctly, stress can be a motivator instead of a burden.

With all of these factors affecting each and every American, it is no wonder obesity is on the rise. In fact, the obesity rates in America are rising at alarming rates. Many health officials are pleading with the public to accept the obesity epidemic with as much vigor as other recent serious health outbreaks, such as AIDS. Some figures taken by researchers on America's West Coast say that obesity numbers that were around 12 percent during the 1990's have now skyrocketed to 19 percent. An astonishing seven percent rise in only one decade should be an unacceptable figure to the American people.

Where is this epidemic of obesity hitting America, you ask? The unfortunate answer is everywhere. Obesity has targeted America, and no state or region is untouched by the outbreak. According to statistics from ObesityinAmerica.org, all eight regions of the United States had increases in obesity rates between 5.71 and 9.95 percent, and these figures took place during a nine-year study. It is quite evident that not just one part of America is suffering from this affliction, but the entire country is affected.

Surprisingly enough, a serious obesity epidemic does not date that far back into America's history. Although the government has only tracked obesity numbers since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the real rise in obesity came after 1980. This is also when industrialized America was reaching its peak, and the "typical American life" as we know it today became common practice. It is during this time period that obesity in adults more than doubled, and obesity in adolescents nearly tripled.

Although the history of American obesity is relatively brief, the outlook for the future seems like a much longer path. With no change in the "typical" American in sight, it seems that the obesity problem in adults will continue to grow. And with evidence that obese parents greatly increase the chances of obese children, it appears that obesity will be a blemish in American society for many years to come. However, this does not mean that measures are not being taken to free America from its burden.

Today, numerous government and private agencies are spreading the news about obesity and the health problems associated with it. Without a doubt, more Americans today know about the dangers of obesity. Much progress has been made as far as the creativity and flexibility of workouts that are simple enough that everyday people can complete them. Efforts have also been made to help Americans create better balanced diets by taking in the correct portions of nutrients to prevent malnutrition and obesity. Although the number of Americans who suffer from obesity is still rising, there are obvious attempts to improve awareness about the dangers of obesity.

The numbers do not lie, and it is indisputable that America has a serious obesity problem among its population. Obesity has crept into the lives of 30.5 percent of Americans, and nearly twice that number suffers from being overweight. However, quality of life is not the only danger that obese people face. In fact, obesity exposes people to a wide variety of serious health conditions, ranging from arthritis to life threatening cardiovascular diseases. Unfortunately for most Americans, the root of their obesity

problems can be found in their way of life. The stereotypical American fast paced way of life is not conducive to healthy eating decisions and exercise patterns, which forms grossly unhealthy living patterns. Surprisingly enough, millions of Americans actually suffer from malnutrition! The unbalanced diets that our well known fast food establishments help cause have created deficiencies of certain nutrients that are essential to the human body. Fortunately, there are some easy steps that Americans can take to help decrease obesity. First, eating habits need to be rethought with a focus on keeping well balanced diets. Exercise routines are also necessities. Only 30 minutes a day, four days a week of simple exercise to increase the heart rate is needed to keep one's body healthy. Americans as a whole also need to learn to better deal with stress. Instead of using food as a comfort from stress, it needs to be used as a positive motivator in everyday life. Although the numbers on obesity seem to be rising, there are still many organizations that are helping spread the truth about obesity, in order to make a difference. Although America surely faces an uphill battle with obesity, the will of the American public can turn the epidemic around.

### Bibliography

American Obesity Association. 25 Sept. 2005 <<http://www.obesity.org/>>.

"Americans Not Getting Enough Exercise." About. 15 Aug. 2003. 25 Sept. 2005 <<http://sleepdisorders.about.com/b/a/018214.htm>>.

"Americans Weigh in Over Time." 27 Sept. 2005 <<http://www.bookrags.com/other/statistics/americans-weigh-in-over-time-ipf4-10.html>>.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 25 Sept. 2005 <<http://www.cdc.gov/>>.

"Mind/Body Health: Obesity." APA Help Center. American Psychological Association. 25 Sept. 2005 <<http://www.apahelpcenter.org/articles/article.php?id=106>>.

Nutrition and Food Safety. 25 Sept. 2005 <<http://www.eufic.org/gb/home/home.htm>>.

"Obesity on the Rise--Healthy Eating and Exercise are Urged." King County Public Health. 05 Jan. 2001. 27 Sept. 2005 <<http://www.metrokc.gov/health/news/01012501.htm>>.

U.S. Census Bureau. 25 Sept. 2005 <[http://factfinder.census.gov/home/saff/main.html?\\_lang](http://factfinder.census.gov/home/saff/main.html?_lang)>