



# Obesity

Being overweight is an extremely common medical and social problem in the United States today. The overabundance of fast food and the trend to supersize everything edible help make this country the fattest nation in the world.

Experts disagree as to what constitutes the normal range of “ideal” body weights.

For social and psychological reasons, people often want to weigh less than medical evidence would suggest is required for optimal health. Just as obesity is a risk factor for certain medical problems, so is being too thin. Many people are concerned about eating the right foods and getting proper vitamins and minerals.

Of all nutritional concerns in this country, however, the major problem is overnutrition.



## Why are Some People Overweight?

A medical disease, such as hypothyroidism, can cause obesity. If you have put on weight over a short period of time, one might think that a medical illness could cause the gain in weight. This is a possibility, but unlikely.

Obesity is usually caused by eating too much. The energy content of food is measured in calories. The body requires energy (calories) to keep working—to keep your heart beating and the other functions of the body going. If you eat more calories than your body needs, these extra calories are turned into fat.

## Why People Eat More than Needed?

Obesity can be caused by lifelong habits acquired in childhood. For example, you are told as a child to “always clean off your plate” or you are given extra dessert as a reward, or you celebrate by eating a huge meal. Stress—nervous tension, frustration at home or work, and depression, can all result in increased food consumption. Emotional problems leading to obesity are many, many times more common than medical diseases such as thyroid problems. The most common cause of obesity is the social pattern or habit of overeating one has acquired.

## Is Obesity Dangerous?

Obesity is associated with high blood pressure, diabetes, arthritis, complications after accidents or surgery, and decreased life expectancy. However, social pressures experienced by the overweight, not medical concerns, are probably the most important motivating factor in losing weight.

## How Can I Lose Weight?

To lose weight you must either take in fewer calories (eat less) or use up more calories (exercise more). There is no other way around it.

Because obesity is so common, because there is no one right way, and because most people fail at long-term weight loss, endless diets are promoted in magazines and books.

Crash diets and other fads almost always fail to produce lasting results. They may in fact, be harmful. In order to lose weight and maintain good health you must change your eating and exercise habits *on a long-term basis*. You must eat less. You should eat a balanced diet. Much advice is available, but the final results come from *you* changing *your* habits.

Read more about losing weight in the companion article *Tips to Help You Lose Weight*.



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