

Women (and Men and Kids) Tip the Scales

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If you like to watch old movies on cable TV or Netflix, you'll probably notice how thin most of the actors are. Not painfully thin, just normally thin – the way most people in America used to be until the 1980s.

Fast forward to television shows and films today, where overweight actors are fairly common. There is even “My 600-Pound Life”, a creepy cable show that depicts real people who weigh 600 pounds or more and are struggling to lose hundreds of pounds before those pounds actually kill them.

Just last month, the United States passed an alarming new milestone: more than four in 10 American women (compared to 35 percent of men) are now classified as obese, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. These scary numbers were published online June 7 by the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, and were based on a small government survey that is considered the best measure of the nation's obesity problem.

For comparison, until the early 1980s, only about one in six American adults were obese.

Obesity means not just overweight, but dangerously overweight.

It's increasingly considered one of the country's leading public health problems because it can trigger diabetes and also lead to heart disease, high blood pressure, arthritis, cancer, and other dangerous medical conditions.

The 40 percent obesity figure for U.S. women is a “really alarming figure,” Dana Hunnes told *The Guardian*, “and it's alarming that it's continuing to go up despite government calls to action on weight loss and healthy eating.” Hunnes is a dietician who sees obese patients at Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center in Los Angeles.

Another piece of the story here is that obesity seems to be a problem especially among women in their 40s and 50s. For middle-aged females, obesity has risen 42 percent since 1999-2000, according to the CDC. That's discouraging, of course, to women who are valiantly trying to lose the weight they gained during their 20s and 30s, perhaps when they were having babies.

But the number of young people in America who are overweight or obese is equally disturbing. When I was in high school, only two or three people in my class of 98 students were a bit plump. But according to the 2015 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, 13.9 percent of high-school students in the U.S. were obese, and an additional 16.0 percent were overweight.

In South Carolina, it's even worse. We are #2 in the country (at 21.5 percent) for obesity among children between the ages of 10 and 17. If we only consider students of high-school age, we rank #8 nationally, at 16.3 percent.

Among adults, obesity in South Carolina was 32.1 percent in 2015, up from 21.1 percent in 2000 and 12 percent in 1990.

You probably already know the reasons for these distressing statistics: too much fast food, fewer family meals and more meals on the go, more sedentary lifestyles, less exercising, and the recent, misplaced government emphasis on forgoing fatty food (actually, food that has "good fat", such as nuts and olive oil, *doesn't* cause weight gain) instead of cutting down on "bad carbs" (such as white bread, most cereals, pizza, sweets, and sugary drinks - which *do* load on the pounds).

Personally, I think a hefty part of the problem for all of us is that the portions served in America are gargantuan. (When my friends from New Zealand visit the United States, they invariably remark, with wonder, on how massive the portion sizes are.)

According to dieticians, here is what a recommended portion size would look like: a serving of potatoes would equal the size of a computer mouse; a serving of red meat would equal the size of a deck of cards; a serving of rice or pasta would equal the size of a tennis ball; a serving of cheese would equal the size of a matchbook; a serving of chips would fit in a regular size mug.

Now, think about how much most of us usually eat at one sitting.

A final note: the medical and economic toll of obesity remains huge, too. According to the journal *Health Affairs*, the obesity epidemic carries a \$117 billion medical price tag.

That's enough to dull anybody's appetite.

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