

Living Large

HAS OBESITY BECOME AN AMERICAN EPIDEMIC?

By Cheryl Fenton

It's tough not to be overweight if you live in the U.S.

While medical professionals and nutritionists tell us to look to smaller portions, fast-food giants are giving us game pieces for fabulous cash and prizes if we "supersize" it.

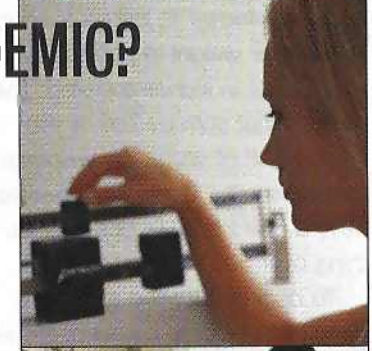
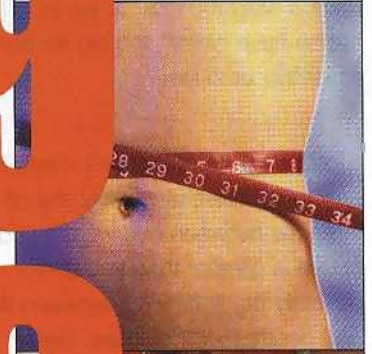
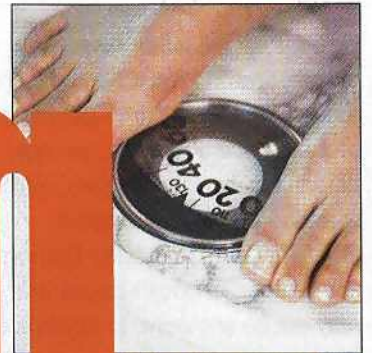
And you can't exactly whip up a nutritious, low-fat dinner while you are working late at the office. Chances are, it's the food deliveryman who'll nourish you with his giant containers of goodies.

The fact is, you can't swing a Twinkie without hitting a double cheeseburger. Gas stations, work, the mall. Food—and not very healthy food—is everywhere.

And if you think you're crunched for cooking time, what about hitting the gym?

The result? Obesity is becoming about as American as apple pie (with a scoop of vanilla, please). Results of the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey 2000 indicate that an estimated 61 percent of

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U.S. adults are either overweight or obese. And the issue has only gotten worse. Our children (30 percent of them), even our pets, are now part of the obesity problem, which is attributed to an estimated 300,000 deaths annually. Barring any genetic or health issues that may cause someone to legitimately have a weight problem, we as a nation have gotten too big for our collective britches.

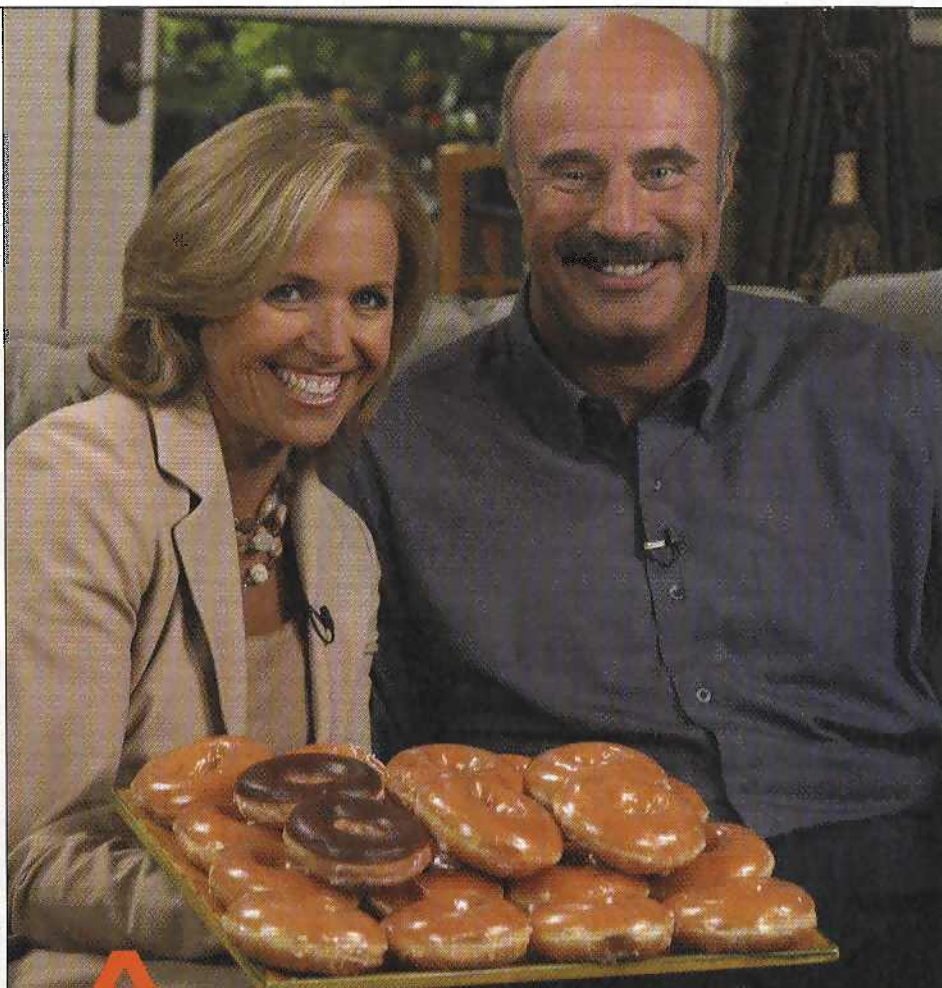
Overweight vs. Obese

Although the terms are mistakenly used interchangeably, the differences between overweight and obese is greater than you think—possibly the difference between life and death. Heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, sleep apnea, asthma, diabetes, osteoarthritis, some cancers—all of these increase with weight gain. For example, for every two-pound increase in weight, the risk of developing arthritis is increased by 9 to 13 percent.

The BMI (Body Mass Index) is the most accepted way to measure body size today. To calculate yours, divide your weight in pounds by your height in inches squared. Then multiply that sum by 703. If you have a BMI of under 25, welcome to the minority. Overweight people have a BMI 25-29.9; obese is anything over 30.

To begin educating about this dangerous obesity problem, former U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher released a report in 2001 that detailed a call to action for prevention of obesity in Americans. "If this was an infectious disease, like SARS or something, we would put all of our resources to stopping this virus or bacteria," says Dr. Satcher.

But why us? Why have Americans become such an



According to Dr. Phil McGraw, both in his new bestseller *The Ultimate Weight Solution* and his interview with NBC's Katie Couric, there are seven keys to unlocking the doors to weight control.

Right Thinking "If you look at yourself and say, 'I can't do this,' you're right."

Healing Feelings "If you're just eating to feed your body, you wouldn't be overweight. If you're overweight, you are using food for other than nutritional purposes."

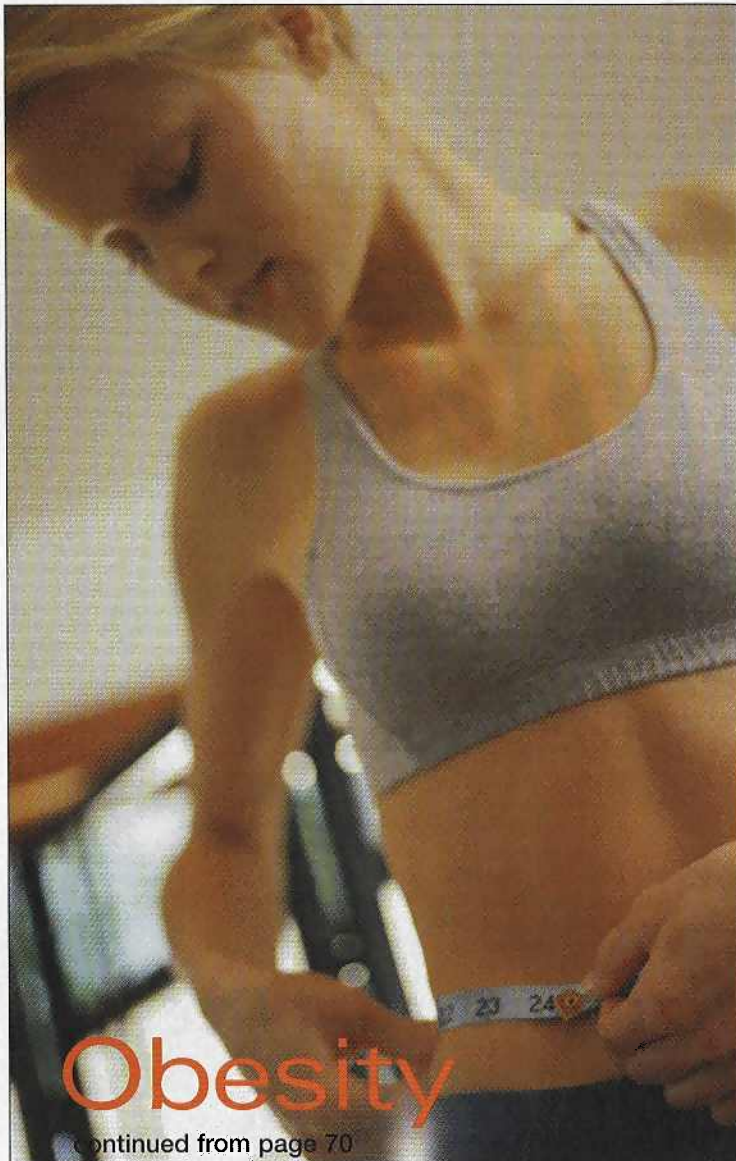
A No-Fail Environment "Those chips, cakes and cookies in your house? You've got to lose them, to lose it."

Mastery Over Food and Impulse Eating "If you can identify those impulse times and do something incompatible with eating for [those] few minutes, the impulse passes."

High-Response Cost, High-Yield Nutrition "The longer a food takes to prepare or eat, the better it probably is for your diet."

Intentional Exercise "Create consequences for yourself if you don't work out."

Your Circle of Support "If you've got friends who just want to eat and drink, and you've got 100 pounds to lose, you need to change friends."



unhealthy society? From the environment to laziness, lack of exercise to drive-through distractions, it seems that the odds (and pancakes) are stacked against Jane and John Doe American.

Fries with That?

There once was a time when you simply got gas at a gas station. Now you can fuel up in a different way, with chips and candy, donuts, nachos, hot dogs and burritos.

And it's not just in the gas stations where you find big gulps and super subs. The average restaurant

diner finds herself in front of more food than ever before. According to recent food surveys, serving sizes of burgers, fries and sodas are two to five times larger than in the past 25 years.

"One example is the popular fast food place where a few years ago French fries came in two-ounce bags," says Dr. Satcher. "And that's about 200 calories. But now the supersized one is over six ounces and 600 calories."

Whether it's the Clean Plate Club (the tendency to eat all of what's put before you), a sense of accomplishment or getting your money's worth, "if it's served, [Americans] will eat it," warns Jennifer Fournier, a registered dietician with the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in Worcester, Massachusetts.

No one can deny the role portions play in our collective weight gain. Enter the French Paradox. Francophiles say "oui" to just about every no-no food out there—high-calorie sauces, rich cheeses and decadent desserts. So, how is it

that only 8 percent of France's population is overweight? Simple: portions.

"Their portions are 1/3 to 1/4 of ours. So they have a piece of cheese, but they have an ounce, not four," says Fournier. "The French also socialize over food, so there's a de-stressing aspect to it. There's a different attachment to food, a different pace of life," she continues. "The word 'snack' doesn't exist in France. 'Snack' is an insult to the enjoyment of food.

"(Americans) suck it down and move onto the next task," Fournier theorizes. "We have an internal mechanism to stop eating, but we don't listen to it. We get used to a little bit of discomfort until we aren't even aware that we're dying. We are killing ourselves."

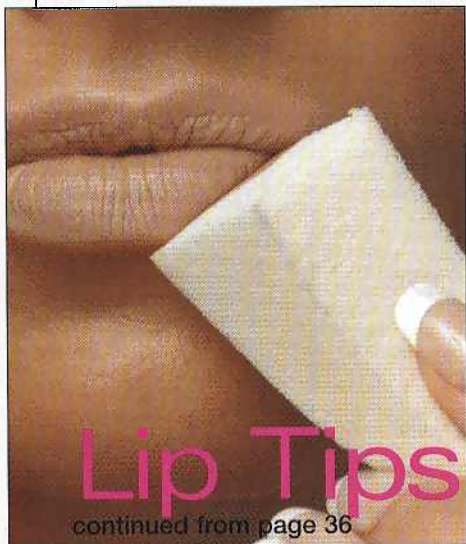
The other problem is, once we've inhaled all of that fat and those calories during our 30-minute lunch break, we're not burning it off. We as Americans are certainly exercising our right to be fat, but it's too bad we aren't exercising much else.

There are always excuses not to exercise. Long work days, expensive gym memberships, fatigue. But mix a large appetite with a small exercise routine, and you've got a recipe for a weight problem.

How to Battle the Bulge

"Look at the mixed messages we are getting from our culture as a whole," says Dr. Betsy Austin, a health psychologist with UMASS Medical Center confers with patients preparing to undergo gastric reduction bypass surgery. "If you pick up a magazine, what are the things on the cover that grab your attention? 'Lose 20 Pounds in 3 Days' and

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My lipstick color seems to darken as I wear it. Is this normal and what can I do to keep the color I love?

First, be certain that your not using an old lipstick that may have gone bad. If that's not the case, the color change you're noticing is likely due to your own body chemistry. It's not a cause for alarm; chances are the acid content in your body is reacting with the pigment in the lipstick. Next time just use a bit of concealer on lips before sweeping on your lipstick. This will cause a barrier between your lips and the lipstick, helping to minimize the chemical reaction.

Is there anything I can do to balance out my uneven lips? My top lip is noticeably thinner than the bottom one.

Use a lip liner in a color as close to your natural lipcolor as possible. The idea here is to extend your natural lip line a bit to even out the look. Use the liner slightly above the outer edge of your thinner upper lip to give the illusion of fullness. Your lower should be lined along the natural contour of the lip. Then fill in both lips with your favorite lip color. ■

Obesity

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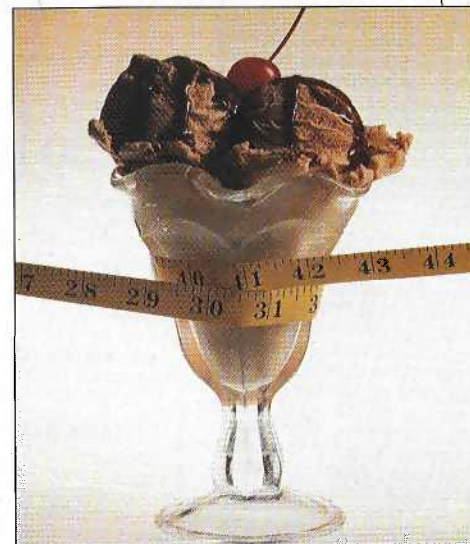
'How to Make a Chocolate Cake.' We need a more balanced way to approach our lives so that we can do the exercise, meal preparation and food shopping." "When people start to gain weight, they get demoralized by the challenge of losing it," says Fournier. "At some point they give up, and it becomes an emotional battle. This very painful for people."

Experts have these suggestions to help with the difficult task of reversing the cycle of obesity in our country. Whether it's dancing, walking the dog in the park or biking to the store: Get moving. Thirty minutes a day of moderate physical activity is the recommended amount of exercise, according to the National Institute of Health.

Take time to notice why you are eating. Says Fournier, "People eat mindlessly." Dr. Austin agrees. "A lot of people are eating for many reasons, but primarily they are eating to manage their stress," she says.

Cut the right carbohydrates. "Carbs are not inherently bad," says Fournier. "The *quality* of the carb can make it bad. If you eat a piece of white bread, in about 30 to 40 minutes you are going to want something else to eat. Because it gets in your system fast, your body responds with insulin fast and you have nothing left. It creates a cycle of craving." She suggests carbohydrates like brown rice, barley and wheat.

Nutrition experts recommend following the USDA Food Guide Pyramid. That's six to 11 servings of bread, fortified cereal, rice and pasta (keep in mind the types of carbs you eat here); three to five of vegetables;



two to four of fruits; two to three of milk, yogurt and cheese; two to three of meat, poultry, fish, dry beans, eggs and nuts; and sparse use of fats, oils and sweets.

"We need to construct communities to support activity through bike paths and walking paths," says Fournier. "Safety is also a big one. If you aren't comfortable going for a walk in your neighborhood, then you are just going to go from your home to your car to the store and back."

Hidden calories are not so elusive if you know where to look. Try low-or non-fat foods, many of which are loaded with sugar to compensate for lack of fat. They often contain more calories per serving than the original version. And don't forget the extra calories in juices and sodas. Five hundred calories of soda or juice every day for a week equals a pound of fat.

It is possible to stop the madness. But we have to remain focused. Keep our eyes on the future prize, not on our current size. "This is about gradual change over time, not a quick change," says Fournier. "There is a huge behavioral component, and behavior change is hard." ■