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## The Obesity Epidemic: Americans continue to get fatter, with 80% over recommended weight and 33% who are now twenty percent or more overweight

In the early 1990s, in reporting our research findings, we wrote that “Americans are the fattest people on Earth and getting fatter every year.” Alas, the trend continues. While data from many other countries show the same trend, the United States leads the world on this measure.

Every year since 1983, Harris Interactive has asked a nationwide cross section of adults several questions to determine how many are overweight and underweight, using the Metropolitan Life\* tables based on weight, height and body frame.

This survey by Harris Interactive, also measuring smoking behavior and seat belt use, was conducted with a nationwide cross section of 1,011 adults interviewed by telephone between January 16 - 21, 2002. Results show that:

- Among people over 25 (the population for which the Metropolitan Life\* tables were developed) **80% of the public are overweight**, up from 58% in 1983, 64% in 1990 and 71% in 1995.
- Fully **33% are now twenty percent overweight**, a reasonable measure of obesity, compared to 15% in 1983, 16% in 1990, and 22% in 1995. In other words, obesity has more than doubled from less than one-sixth of the population eighteen years ago to one-third today.
- While the proportion of adults who **smoke cigarettes** is down to 23% in this survey, this is a decline of only seven points (from 30%) since 1983, and of three points (from 26%) since 1990. Indeed, all the modest changes in the smoking rate, as we have measured it over the last few years, are within the possible sampling error for this survey. **So if there has been any reduction in the smoking rate over the last decade (and other research indicates there has), it has been extremely modest.**
- **81% of all adults say that they now wear seat belts** when in the front seat of a car. This is a huge increase over the 19% who said this in 1983, the 65% in 1990 and the 73% in 1995. This is perhaps the biggest single success story in public health over the last twenty years. One reason for this huge change was the law passed in the 1980s by states to mandate seat belt use. It's a powerful example that legislation, even when weakly enforced as it is in most states, can change both attitudes and behavior very dramatically. Another reason is that – unlike smoking cessation or weight control – seat belt use requires no self-discipline, no sacrifice of gratification and no need to overcome addiction. There is gain without pain. It's easy to buckle up but it's very difficult to kick the smoking habit or lose much weight.

Sadly, obesity is not just a problem for adults. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has been raising a red flag because the number of school children who are overweight has also been rising rapidly over the last two decades with a big increase in Type 2 (adult onset) diabetes among teenagers, something that used to be almost unknown. And overweight children tend to become overweight adults.

*\*We use the “old” Metropolitan Life tables.*

**TABLE 1**

**Smoking, Overweight and Seat Belt Use Trends 1983 – 2002**

Base: All adults over 25

		Smoke Cigarettes <sup>1</sup>	Are Overweight	20% or More Overweight*	Always Wear Seat Belts**
1983	%	30	58	15	19
1984	%	28	56	N/A	27
1985	%	30	62	15	41
1986	%	27	59	N/A	55
1987	%	28	59	15	57
1988	%	26	64	18	60
1989	%	28	61	17	63
1990	%	26	64	16	65
1991	%	25	63	15	69
1992	%	24	66	N/A	70
1994	%	26	69	N/A	71
1995	%	25	71	22	73
1996	%	24	74	24	75
1997	%	26	72	27	74
1998	%	26	76	28	77
1999	%	24	74	27	77
2000	%	21	79	32	79
2001	%	25	76	32	81
<b>2002</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>81</b>

\*Adults over 25 (for weight only).

\*\*When in front seat of the car.

N/A=Not available.

Notes: Almost all these surveys were conducted in January or February in the years listed.

<sup>1</sup>The 23% of the public who smoke cigarettes does not include others who do not smoke cigarettes but smoke cigars (2%), a pipe (less than 0.5%) or who chew tobacco (1%). In all, according to our latest survey, 26% are exposed to tobacco through smoking or chewing (see Table 2).

## Are Americans fatter than people in other countries?

The OECD and other sources publish cross-national measures of obesity using a different definition (Body Mass Index). The numbers are always several years out of date (it takes time to collect the data from so many countries) but they confirm two conclusions. First, the **United States has the largest proportion of people (over 15) who are obese**, defined as having a Body Mass Index of over 30. Secondly, **obesity is increasing in many countries; not only in the United States.**

One striking finding in the international data is that France has a relatively low level of obesity – lower than all the major English-speaking countries – in spite of their love of cream, butter, foie gras and other rich and fatty foods. It has been suggested that this is because the French consume far fewer calories overall, that they eat smaller portions, drink far fewer sodas and eat much less between meals. For example, when the French go to the movies and sports games, they eat less popcorn and hot dogs and consume less soda.

**CHART 1**

**Percent of the Population Age 15 and Older That is Obese**

Body Mass Index > 30 kg/m<sup>2</sup> 9,10



Source: The Commonwealth Fund, OECD Health Data 2000, New Zealand National Nutrition Survey 1997, and Health Survey for England 1998.

### Why are we getting fatter?

It has been reported that we are consuming more calories per person than ever before. Servings, in restaurants and possibly at home also, have gotten larger. We consume more sodas and fruit juices that are rich in sugar. We eat more between meals. And stress seems to be a factor; increases in “bad stress” sometimes increase calorie consumption and reduce the metabolic rate.

Why are we doing this? A reasonable assumption is that this is substantially advertising driven. Television in particular is crowded with commercials for mouth-watering foods and life-enhancing soft drinks. And advertising works.

### Demographic Differences

Analysis of our data shows that men are somewhat more likely to be overweight than women (but not more likely to be obese) and are less likely to wear seat belts.

In general people who are more educated smoke less, are less likely to be obese and are more likely to wear seat belts than those who are less educated.

**TABLE 2**  
**Health Behaviors by Demographics**

		Smoke Cigarettes	Are Overweight	20% or More Overweight*	Always Wear Seat belts**
All Adults	%	23	80	33	81
<b>SEX:</b>					
Male	%	25	86	30	75
Female	%	22	76	36	87
<b>RACE/ETHNICITY:</b>					
White	%	22	79	32	82
Blacks	%	24	84	31	85
Hispanics	%	22	90	34	74
<b>EDUCATION:</b>					
High school or less	%	28	82	36	79
Some college	%	26	79	32	80
College graduate	%	12	80	30	85
Post graduate	%	6	80	27	92
<b>AGE:</b>					
18 – 24	%	25	*	*	80
25 – 29	%	39	84	29	74
30 – 39	%	24	72	33	79
40 – 49	%	27	81	33	84
50 – 64	%	20	90	43	82
65 +	%	12	78	35	82

\*Not computed (Metropolitan Life tables apply to 25 and over).

**TABLE 3**  
**Use of other Types of Tobacco**  
“Do you smoke a pipe or cigars or use chewing tobacco?”

Base: All Adults	All Adults	Smoke Cigarettes Now	Don't Smoke Cigarettes Now
	%	%	%
Pipe	1	2	*
Cigars	4	11	2
Chewing tobacco	1	1	1

Note: Those who use any type of tobacco including cigarettes: 26%.

\*Less than 0.5%

### Success and failure in attempts to lose weight

Obesity continues to increase even though many people are trying to lose weight, and a surprisingly large number claim to have been successful.

This survey found that:

- Most people (60%) say they would like to lose weight, including 72% of those who are overweight (as well as some of those who are not).
- A similar proportion of all adults (58%) say they have made a serious effort to lose weight, including 65% of those who are overweight now (and substantial numbers who are not overweight).
- More than half (57%) of those who say they successfully lost weight say they have managed to stay at more or less the same weight. This represents 28% of all adults.

**TABLE 4**

**Would Like to Lose Weight**

“Would you like to lose weight, or not?”

Base: All Adults

	Total %	Underweight %	Within Range %	Overweight %
Would like	60	12	24	72
Would not	40	88	76	28

**TABLE 5**

**How Many Times Have Tried to Lose Weight**

“How many times, if ever, in your life have you made a serious effort to lose weight?”

Base: All Adults

	Total %	Underweight %	Within Range %	Overweight %
Have ever tried to lose weight (net)	58	27	40	65
Once or twice	28	15	24	29
3 – 5 times	15	11	7	17
More than 5 times	15	2	10	18
<b>MEAN (if tried)</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>MEDIAN (if tried)</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>

**TABLE 6**

**Last Time You Tried to Lose Weight Were You Successful?**

“The last time you tried to lose weight were you successful in losing weight or not?”

Base: Tried to lose weight

	Total %	Underweight %	Within Range %	Overweight %
Successful	85	87	88	86
Not successful	13	13	11	12
Not sure/Refused	2	-	2	3

Note: The 85% of those who tried to lose weight who say they successfully did so represents 50% of all adults.

**TABLE 7**

**If Succeeded in Losing Weight Have You Managed to Keep it Off?**

“Have you managed to stay at more or less the same weight you were then, or have you put most of the weight you lost back on again?”

Base: Was successful in losing weight

	Total %	Underweight %	Within Range %	Overweight %
Managed to stay at (reduced) weight	57	93	78	53
Put most of weight on again	41	7	22	46
Not sure	1	-	-	2

Note: The 57% of those who successfully lost weight who have managed to stay at their reduced weight represents 28% of all adults.

**So what? The health impact of obesity**

A recent issue of *Issue Focus* published by **Grantmakers in Health** reports that:

“According to U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher, overweight and obesity may soon cause as much preventable disease and death as cigarette smoking. The conditions are already responsible for as many as 300,000 premature deaths each year and cost the nation \$117 billion in 2000 alone.

**Excess Pounds, Extra Problems**

Obesity is associated with an increased risk for:

- Type 2 diabetes
- Hypertension
- High blood cholesterol
- Heart disease
- Stroke
- Cancer
- Gallbladder diseases
- Asthma
- Osteoarthritis
- Depression
- Complications in pregnancy
- Sleep apnea

While individual body weight has a complex set of causes, most researchers attribute the recent increase in obesity among both adults and children to two simple facts: We are eating more and exercising less. In the 1990s, Americans consumed more food and several hundred more calories per day than they did in the 1970s. Why? Fewer meals were eaten at home, average portion sizes grew, and the availability of convenience foods – foods that are high in fat and sugar – exploded.”

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## About Harris Interactive<sup>SM</sup>

Harris Interactive (Nasdaq: HPOL) is a worldwide market research and consulting firm, best known for *The Harris Poll*<sup>®</sup> and its pioneering use of the Internet to conduct scientifically accurate market research. Strengthened by its recent merger with Total Research Corporation, the Company now combines the power of technology with international expertise in predictive, custom, strategic research. Headquartered in the United States, with offices in the United Kingdom, Japan and a global network of local market and opinion research firms, the Company conducts international research with fluency in multiple languages. For more information about Harris Interactive, visit [www.harrisinteractive.com](http://www.harrisinteractive.com). EOE M/F/D/V

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