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## Has the Obesity Epidemic Peaked?

*Proportions of overweight and obese U.S. adults increased rapidly from 1983 to 2002 but have not increased in last three years*

*The Harris Poll*® has been tracking important lifestyles and behaviors which influence life-expectancy and disease rates for more than 20 years. Much has changed since the first survey of adults nationwide in 1983. Between 1983 and 2005, these surveys by Harris Interactive show that:

- Cigarette smokers have declined from 30 to 19 percent of all adults, and
- Those who claim that they always wear seatbelts have increased from 19 to 86 percent of adults.

Obviously, these trends are very good news. However, over these same 22 years, Harris Interactive finds that in relation to people's weight:

- People aged 25 and over who are over their recommended weight for their height and body frame<sup>1</sup> have increased from 58 to 77 percent, and
- Those who are obese (defined as weighing 20 percent or more than their recommended weight<sup>2</sup>) have doubled from 15 to 30 percent.

These are some of the results of a new Harris Poll of 1,012 U.S. adults surveyed by telephone by Harris Interactive between February 8 and 13, 2005.

However, a closer reading of these data suggest that the obesity epidemic – which is probably the most serious trend adversely affecting the future health and longevity of the population – may have peaked. The proportion of people over the age of 25 who are overweight reached 80 percent in 2002 and 2003 but were registered at 76 percent in 2004 and 77 percent this year. The proportion who are obese (i.e. 20% or more overweight) peaked at 33 percent in 2002 and 2003 but has been measured at 30 percent in both 2004 and 2005.

**TABLE 1**

**Smoking, Overweight and Seat Belt Use – Trends 1983-2005**

Base: All Adults

|      |   | Smoke Cigarettes | Are Overweight* | 20% or More Overweight* | Always Wear Seatbelts** |
|------|---|------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 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                      |
| 2002 | % | 23               | 80              | 33                      | 81                      |
| 2003 | % | 24               | 80              | 33                      | 85                      |
| 2004 | % | 25               | 76              | 30                      | 83                      |
| 2005 | % | 19               | 77              | 30                      | 86                      |

\* Adults aged 25 and over (for weight only).

\*\* When in front seat of car.

N/A = Not available.

Note 1: In almost all years the survey was conducted in January or February.

Note 2: "Overweight" is based on the Metropolitan Life Tables using self-reported weight, height and body frame (small, medium or large). Like all self-reporting this is subject to error, but the identical questions and methods were used in all these surveys.

Note 3: Poll not conducted in 1993.

Of course, with relatively modest changes in these key measures of lifestyles and health risks in most years, small sampling and measurement errors in any one year may create the illusion of change (or lack of it). To address this possible problem, it is worth looking at the trends on a five-year basis and averaging the findings over each five years. When we analyze the overweight and obesity numbers in this way, the data do not yet confirm that the obesity epidemic has peaked.

**TABLE 2**

**Overweight or Obese Adults in Five-Year Increments**

Base: Adults aged 25 and over

|               | Overweight Adults* | Obese Adults** |
|---------------|--------------------|----------------|
| Averages For: | %                  | %              |
| 1983-1985     | 59                 | 15             |
| 1986-1990     | 61                 | 17             |
| 1991-1995     | 67                 | 19             |
| 1996-2000     | 75                 | 28             |
| 2001-2005     | 78                 | 32             |

\* Overweight adults defined as those who weigh more than their recommended weight based on height and body frame. Recommended weight is based on the Metropolitan Life Tables.

\*\* Obese adults defined as adults who weigh 20% or more than their recommended weight based on height and body frame. Recommended weight is based on the Metropolitan Life Tables.

Nevertheless, the results of Harris Interactive’s 2004 and 2005 surveys are encouraging. They both show the lowest (albeit still appallingly high) proportion of people overweight since 2001, and the lowest proportion of obese people since 1999.

This year’s survey also reports the lowest proportion of adults smoking cigarettes (19%) and the highest proportion of adults claiming to wear seatbelts in the front seats of cars (86%) since the questions were first asked in 1983.

### Body Mass Index

Over the last decade the most common way of measuring and describing obesity has been to use the body mass index (BMI) based on height and weight. This method was not in use in the 1980s when Harris Interactive first started reporting the numbers of people who are overweight and obese. At that time the most common measure was the Metropolitan Life Tables based on height, weight and self-reported body frame (small, medium or large). In order to continue these 20-plus years trends Harris Interactive continues to use the original Metropolitan Life Tables.

Using the BMI the 2005 data finds that 59 percent of all adults are now overweight and 23 percent are obese. In the future, we plan to report the trends using both methods.

### Experiences of Trying to Lose Weight

More than half (56%) of all adults, and two-thirds (66%) of those now overweight have tried to lose weight in the past. This includes even higher proportions of those who are obese (88% of those who are 30% or more above their recommended weight, and 71% of those between 20 and 29% over their recommended weight).

Most people who have tried to lose weight have done so more than twice and many have tried numerous times. Of those who are currently overweight, 23 percent have tried six or more times to lose weight and another 19 percent have tried three to five times.

In general the more overweight people are the more times they are likely to have tried to lose weight – clear evidence of how difficult it is to lose weight and not regain it.

**TABLE 3**

**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

|                          | All Adults | All Over-weight | 30% or More Above Range* | 20-29.9% Above Range* | 10-19.9% Above Range* | 5-9.9% Above Range* | Up to 4.9% Above Range* | Within Recommended Weight Range* | Under Weight* |
|--------------------------|------------|-----------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------|
|                          | %          | %               | %                        | %                     | %                     | %                   | %                       | %                                | %             |
| Never                    | 41         | 33              | 9                        | 27                    | 32                    | 51                  | 52                      | 66                               | 77            |
| Ever Tried To Lose (Net) | 56         | 66              | 88                       | 71                    | 65                    | 49                  | 48                      | 32                               | 21            |
| Once                     | 9          | 8               | 9                        | 4                     | 11                    | 7                   | 8                       | 11                               | 10            |
| Twice                    | 12         | 15              | 19                       | 13                    | 12                    | 13                  | 19                      | 7                                | 2             |
| 3-5 Times                | 17         | 19              | 25                       | 25                    | 21                    | 11                  | 12                      | 5                                | 9             |
| 6-10 Times               | 7          | 9               | 17                       | 8                     | 10                    | 5                   | 3                       | 5                                | *             |
| More than 10 Times       | 10         | 14              | 18                       | 21                    | 11                    | 14                  | 7                       | 3                                | -             |
| Not Sure/Refused         | 3          | 1               | 3                        | 1                     | 3                     | *                   | *                       | 3                                | 2             |

Note 1: All columns except for “all adults” are for people aged 25 and over.

Note 2: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

\* Denotes small base.

People do many different things to try to lose weight. The methods which have been used by the largest numbers are:

- Exercise (44% of all adults and 49% of those overweight say they “maintained an exercise schedule”)
- Frequent weighing (used by 38% of all adults and 44% of those overweight)
- Having strong peer support (36% of all adults)
- Counting calories (used by 24% of all adults)

**TABLE 4**

**Different Ways People Have Tried to Lose Weight**

“Which of the following did you make a serious effort at doing?”

Base: All Adults

|  | All Adults | All Over-weight | 30% or More Above Range* | 20-29.9% Above Range* | 10-19.9% Above Range* | 5-9.9% Above Range* | Up to 4.9% Above Range* | Within Recommended Weight Range* |
|--|------------|-----------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------|
|  | %          | %               | %                        | %                     | %                     | %                   | %                       | %                                |
| Maintained an exercise routine                                       | 44         | 49              | 56                       | 52                    | 48                    | 42                  | 45                      | 28                               |
| Weighed yourself frequently  | 38         | 44              | 58                       | 52                    | 43                    | 32                  | 32                      | 20                               |
| Had strong peer or family support                                    | 36         | 43              | 75                       | 40                    | 42                    | 30                  | 23                      | 18                               |
| Counted calories   | 24         | 27              | 39                       | 32                    | 21                    | 19                  | 22                      | 13                               |
| Followed a diet where you counted carbs                              | 19         | 22              | 35                       | 20                    | 20                    | 15                  | 18                      | 16                               |
| Used nutritional supplements   | 18         | 21              | 34                       | 28                    | 14                    | 21                  | 11                      | 12                               |
| Kept a food journal  | 14         | 17              | 27                       | 26                    | 15                    | 9                   | 8                       | 6                                |
| Participated in a weight loss program you paid for                   | 12         | 13              | 18                       | 25                    | 10                    | 5                   | 7                       | 7                                |
| Participated in a weight loss program where you purchased their food | 4          | 5               | 11                       | 3                     | 5                     | 1                   | 5                       | 1                                |
| Used a personal nutritionist   | 4          | 5               | 9                        | 6                     | 3                     | 5                   | 1                       | 4                                |
| Used a personal trainer  | 3          | 3               | 5                        | 4                     | 2                     | 2                   | 3                       | 2                                |

Note: All columns except for “all adults” are for people aged 25 and over.

\* Denotes small base.

Downloadable PDFs of the Harris Interactive *Health Care News* can be found at:  
[http://www.harrisinteractive.com/news/newsletters\\_healthcare.asp](http://www.harrisinteractive.com/news/newsletters_healthcare.asp).

## Methodology

*The Harris Poll*® was conducted by telephone within the United States between February 8 and 13, 2005, among a nationwide cross section of 1,012 adults aged 18 and over. Figures for age, sex, race, education, number of adults and number of voice/telephone lines in the household were weighted where necessary to align them with their actual proportions in the population.

In theory, with a probability sample of this size, one can say with 95 percent certainty that the results have a sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points of what they would be if the entire U.S. adult population had been polled with complete accuracy. Sampling error for the various sub-sample results is higher and varies. Unfortunately, there are several other possible sources of error in all polls or surveys that are probably more serious than theoretical calculations of sampling error. They include refusals to be interviewed (non-response), question wording and question order, interviewer bias, weighting by demographic control data and screening (e.g., for likely voters). It is impossible to quantify the errors that may result from these factors.

*These statements conform to the principles of disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls.*

## About Harris Interactive

**Harris Interactive Inc.** ([www.harrisinteractive.com](http://www.harrisinteractive.com)), the 15th largest and fastest-growing market research firm in the world, is a Rochester, N.Y.-based global research company that blends premier strategic consulting with innovative and efficient methods of investigation, analysis and application. Known for *The Harris Poll*® and for pioneering Internet-based research methods, Harris Interactive conducts proprietary and public research to help its clients achieve clear, material and enduring results.

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