

Obesity Epidemic Continues to Worsen in the United States

Over eight in 10 U.S. adults are overweight, half of whom are obese

Twelve years ago a Harris Poll reported that “Americans are the fattest people on earth and getting fatter every year.” Unfortunately, this still holds true. A new Harris Poll finds that more U.S. adults are overweight and obese than ever before.

There are different ways of defining and measuring that which constitutes being overweight and obese. Harris Interactive has been using one method based on weight, height and body frame (small, medium or large) since 1983. In 2005 and for this new survey, Harris Interactive also calculated body mass index (BMI) using just height and weight. Regardless of the method used, the new survey shows a sharp increase this year in the percentage of U.S. adults who are overweight and obese.

Using the old definition (weight, height and body frame), the proportion of adults 25 years of age and over who are overweight increased to 83 percent this year, up from its highest previous measure of 80 percent in 2002 and 2003. Using this same measure, and counting those who are 20 percent or more overweight, fully 39 percent of U.S. adults are now obese.

Using the BMI, the new survey finds the percentage of overweight adults has increased from 59 to 66 percent this year, and those who are obese increased from 23 to 27 percent.

These are some of the results of a new Harris Poll of 1,016 U.S. adults surveyed by telephone by Harris Interactive between February 7 and 14, 2006.

Due to the fact that all surveys are subject to several possible sources of error, including measurement error and sampling error, it is useful to look at long-term trends, where several surveys are added together to form larger samples and iron out other possible fluctuations. Using this approach, the data show that overweight adults 25 years of age and over increased from 59 percent in the early 1980s to 79 percent, so far, in the years since 2000. This same method, averaging data over several years, shows that adults 25 years of age and over who are obese have increased from 15 percent in the early 1980s to 33 percent in the years since 2001. In other words, obesity has more than doubled over the course of more than 20 years.

Obesity as a cause of disease

Obesity has been linked to many different medical conditions. The surgeon general has indicated that obesity is a cause of heart disease, diabetes, elevated cholesterol, stroke, high blood pressure, some types of cancer, asthma, arthritis and depression. This new survey finds that many adults are aware that obesity is a cause of heart disease (55%) and diabetes (44%), but fewer adults say they know that it is also a cause of elevated cholesterol (14%), stroke (11%), high blood pressure (7%), some cancers (6%), asthma (3%), arthritis (3%) and depression (1%).

Seatbelt use and smoking

In addition to measuring weight and obesity, this survey has, since 1983, measured the percentage of U.S. adults who smoke cigarettes, and who wear seatbelts when in the front seats of cars.

Here the news is much better. The percentage of adults who claim that they always wear seatbelts in the front seats of cars have increased steadily from only 19 percent in 1983 to a current 86 percent.

The proportions of adults who smoke cigarettes has fallen, but this improvement is much more modest. In the early 1980s, 30 percent of adults smoked cigarettes. This has now fallen to 22 percent. However, about one in five U.S. adults still smoke, even though in many cities and states they cannot do so legally at work, in restaurants or in public spaces.

It is important to note that some adults use other kinds of tobacco products. In total, two percent of adults smoke pipes, four percent smoke cigars and two percent use chewing tobacco. Including these adults (some of whom smoke cigarettes), a total of 26 percent of all U.S. adults use some kind of tobacco product.

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
2006	%	22	83	39	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.

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
2001-2006	79	33

*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 percent or more than their recommended weight based on height and body frame. Recommended weight is based on the Metropolitan Life Tables.

TABLE 3
Body Mass Index (BMI)

Base: All adults

		Overweight	Obese
2005	%	59	23
2006	%	66	27

TABLE 4
Knowledge of Diseases Which Increase with Obesity or Being Overweight

“The Surgeon General has suggested that being overweight or obese may increase a person’s chances of having certain conditions. What conditions do you think the Surgeon General associated with being overweight or obese?”

Base: All adults

	Total
	%
Heart disease	55
(Type 2) diabetes	44
High-blood cholesterol	14
Stroke	11
Hypertension	7
Several types of cancer	6
Asthma	3
(Osteo) arthritis	3
Depression	1

TABLE 5
Use of Other Tobacco Products
“Do you smoke a pipe or cigars or use chewing tobacco?”
Base: All adults

	Total
	%
Pipe	2
Cigars	4
Chewing tobacco	2
None	92
Smoke cigarettes (Table 1)	22
Use any type of tobacco product (including cigarettes)	26

Methodology

The Harris Poll was conducted by telephone within the United States between February 7 and 14, 2006, among a nationwide cross section of 1,016 adults aged 18 and over, of whom 910 are aged 25 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. 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), based in Rochester, New York, is the 13th largest and the fastest-growing market research firm in the world, most widely known for *The Harris Poll* and for its pioneering leadership in the online market research industry. Long recognized by its clients for delivering insights that enable confident business decisions, the Company blends the science of innovative research with the art of strategic consulting to deliver knowledge that leads to measurable and enduring value.

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Media inquiries, contact:

Jennifer Cummings 585.214.7720
jcumings@harrisinteractive.com

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