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Weighing In on Obesity

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Eating sustains life and satisfies our desires like few other activities, but striking the balance between energy intake and expenditure is a delicate equilibrium. All too often, and with increasing regularity, the scale tips in the wrong direction. The prevalence of obesity in the U.S. population has nearly doubled in the last 10 years, and today, an estimated 64 percent of Americans are classified as overweight or obese. Even more troubling is the jump in overweight children and adolescents. Fifteen percent of children and teens age 6-19 are overweight, up from 5 percent in 1980.

Being overweight or obese does more than harm one's self-esteem; it has serious health consequences, such as increased risk of Type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and osteoarthritis. These chronic diseases limit the quality of a person's life and carry high societal costs in terms of medical treatment and lost productivity. But the question remains: Why are we as a Nation becoming more overweight and obese? While genetic predisposition and metabolism play a role, so do our choices about exercise and diet. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicate that few Americans exercise regularly or strenuously. Increased eating away from home and larger portion sizes may be contributors to the additional calories many of us are consuming. Food supply estimates by USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) indicate that Americans' average daily calorie consumption in 2000 was 12 percent, or roughly 300 calories, higher than in 1985. Eating is one of the great pleasures of life and Americans are notorious for minimizing future harm when it conflicts with current pleasure. It's hard to pass up the pleasure today of eating a piece of cake for the marginal increase in the likelihood of contracting heart disease in the future. However complex, understanding the multifaceted world of food choices is one key to unlocking a future of healthier, better-nourished Americans.

Economists have a keen interest in behavioral decisions and how people allocate their incomes and time to various goods and services and activities. As readers of *FoodReview* know, ERS has led the way in analyzing how people make food choices. Previous articles dealt with eating away from home, mothers' diet and health knowledge and the quality of their children's diets, and individuals' perceptions of the quality of their diets. The obesity articles in this issue are an extension of this earlier work and make use of national data on what people eat, their knowledge of diet and health relationships, their socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, and their weight status.

For example, one article looks at the relationship between caloric intake and obesity. When individuals are placed in one of three groups based on their caloric intake—heavy, moderate, and light eaters—not all heavy eaters are obese and the relationship varies for men and women and by ethnicity and race. In another article, researchers examine individuals' misperceptions about weight status and find that men are more likely to "doubt" that obesity warnings are meant for them, while women are more likely to "anxiously" and falsely classify themselves as overweight. ERS researchers are also looking at the effects of eating habits on body weight, in particular, consumption of fruits and vegetables. They find that people who eat more servings of fruit each day have lower body mass indices, but the relationship between vegetable consumption and body weight is not as strong or consistent.

The link between obesity and health is firmly established. Progress toward a healthier America will require understanding the behavioral underpinnings of food choice and exercise levels. Reversing our energy imbalance will be slow and erratic, but the rewards are tremendous and the time to start is now.

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