

FUN FACTS!

According to numerous recent studies from The Cooper Institute, Dallas, Texas, a moderately active obese person is likely to be far healthier – and to live longer – than someone who is thin but inactive.

Culture and media have generally associated thinness with virtue; obesity is linked with vice and this ideology drives both the science and culture of our national obsession with weight and weight control.

The word obese originates from the Latin language and refers to, “fattening by eating”.

Questions & Answers!

Q: How do misconceptions pertaining to obesity influence access to health insurance coverage?

A: Historically, obesity has been treated and misconceived as a non-medical condition and only the health complications resulting from obesity were treated as medical conditions. It is due to this misconception that insurance policies can be exclusionary; as plans may legally exclude obesity treatment from coverage. Recent literature suggests not only long-term benefits from obesity treatments and procedures, but an immediate cost savings to insurance carriers as a result of those treatments. As the benefits of these procedures continue to be documented, it will likely lead to better insurance coverage for obesity treatments.

Gibbs WW. Treatment that tightens the belt: is insurance a part of America's obesity problem. *Sci Am* 1995; 272:34-5
Christou NV, Sampalis JS, Liberman M, Look D, Auger S, McLean PH & MacLean LD. Surgery decreases long-term mortality, morbidity and healthcare use in morbidly obese patients. *Ann Surg* 2004; 240:416-424.

Q: Are legal mandates in place to prevent weight-based discrimination?

A: No federal law currently exists to prohibit discrimination against obese individuals. A few state and local governments have embraced weight-specific legislation. For example: Michigan passed a civil rights act that prevents employment discrimination solely based on weight; the District of Columbia forbids discrimination based on appearance, which includes weight; and Santa Cruz, Calif. specifically includes weight in its definition of unlawful discrimination. Despite the trend toward weight-friendly public facilities, many obese individuals still report widespread prejudice and discrimination.

Adamitis EM. Appearance matters: a proposal to prohibit appearance discrimination in the workplace. *Washington Law Rev* 2000; 75:195-223



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MEDIA, CULTURE AND OBESITY

The cultural pressure to be thin...

The cultural mandate to thinness can be traced historically as early as the times of Plato with discussion of the will, self-discipline and other ideals. In 1920, the trend toward thinness was further reinforced by French fashion designer, Christian Dior. Later, the British sensation, Twiggy, became the new and much thinner ideal. Thinness became the social norm initially because it was fashionable. Eventually thinness was thought to be better for health, then it became a moral issue, available only to those who practiced self-discipline—the moral good. This is thought to drive the cultural pressure toward thinness, and the cultural bias against obese people.

Editors Notes...

Popular culture and the media's portrayal of weight and weight issues fuel prejudice and discrimination, which ultimately serves as a barrier to reasonable accommodation. It becomes important to understand this when introducing processes to improve the care and treatment of obese people in the health care settings. The purpose of this XTRAWise is to review some of the cultural controversy pertaining to weight and weight issues, to present a historical perspective and offer some ideas to help children understand the influence media has on helping them develop and formulate their opinions on various groups of people. As always, I welcome your thoughts and ideas on this subject and others.

Susan Gallagher
Susan Gallagher

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The Controversy continues ...

Surgeon General Richard Carmona recently described obesity as a threat to Americans every bit as devastating as terrorism, directly affecting nine million children, two out of three adults and claiming the lives of 400,000 Americans every year. Paul Campos, author of *The Obesity Myth*, disagrees and argues that Americans are in fact only a mere 15 pounds heavier than 20 years ago. He thinks what has changed is the cultural and public health ideal weight. His research contends that weight does not give meaningful information about a person's overall health. More importantly, he asks, "what is the extent to which weight is causal or merely a marker for other things, such as poor nutrition, socio-economic status, weight cycling brought on by dieting and other unhealthy circumstances?" For example, Campos explains to Alternet, "If a person with a BMI of 32 has a significantly increased health risk but is far less likely to have health insurance than someone with a BMI of 25, what is really relevant here? The BMI or health insurance?" Campos tends to focus on lifestyle and healthy living rather than a number on a scale or chart and contends that healthy living such as eating well, activity and safe life practices are more important to good health and are not necessarily related to weight.

Fueling anorexic ideology

The diet culture is simply the culture of anorexia at a socially functional level. This ideology fuels bias toward obesity because people operating within an anorexic mind frame are naturally afraid of the threat of obesity, and therefore obese people.

Media messages emphasize thinness

Experts report one of the strongest predictors for body dissatisfaction, the drive for thinness and bulimic behaviors in adolescent girls, is whether they compare themselves to media images. A recent study examined images in popular media. The study sample included 25 children's videos and 20 books for ages four through eight. The research findings are as follows: the average number of body image-related messages was 8.7 per video and 2.8 per book. Videos with the highest number were Cinderella (14), The Little Mermaid (14), Beauty and the Beast (13), Peter Pan (13), Mulan (12), Hercules (12), Aladdin (11), 101 Dalmatians (11), Pocahontas (11), Sleeping Beauty (11), Anastasia (10) and The Adventures of Ichabod (10). A majority of the videos (72 percent) placed emphasis on physical attractiveness. The study concluded that preoccupation with body size and shape is clearly present during childhood and is influenced considerably by media images portrayed in videos and books intended for young audiences.

Herbozo S, Tantleff-Dunn S, et al. Beauty and thinness messages in childhood media: A content analysis. *Eating Disorders*. 2004;12:21-34.

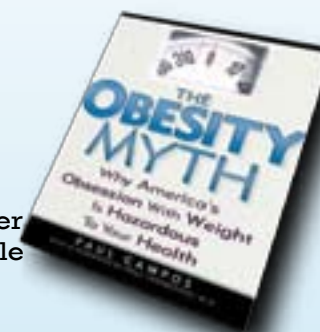


What is media literacy and why is it important for kids?

According to a Kaiser Family Foundation study, each week kids spend the equivalent of 40 hours using some form of media. Knowing how to read messages in the media is called media literacy. It is important for adults to ensure that children are equipped to understand media and how it influences their thinking, including prejudgments toward certain groups. The study suggests that kids need to: recognize how media messages influence and manipulate their thinking, develop critical thinking about media messages—to uncover hidden messages and values and learn to interpret media messages in ways that do not damage their self-esteem. Parents, teachers and other important adults can help children become better equipped to understand these influences (<http://www.kff.org/content/1999/1535/pressreleasefina.doc.html>).

Book review

Campos, Paul. *THE OBESITY MYTH: Why America's Obsession with Weight is Hazardous to Your Health*. Gotham Books: 2004. Paul Campos, a University of Colorado law professor, has spent years conducting research, including hundreds of interviews with leading doctors, scientists, eating disorder specialists and psychologists, as well as people who consider themselves overweight. In the book titled, *The Obesity Myth*, Campos does not argue against the relationship between weight and health. Rather, he argues that the health risks associated with higher BMI are overestimated, while other related and more important risks to health have been ignored. Campos emphasizes that poverty, poor nutrition and a culture that makes it easy for Americans to be sedentary are important public health issues. He contends that Americans should be physically active, eat properly and have reasonable access to medical care. He believes experts should not be telling Americans that they will improve



Web Sources

The American Obesity Association (<http://www.obesity.org/>) is dedicated to public education about the dangers of obesity, preventing obesity in children, advocating for good health care and adequate insurance coverage for obesity treatment, supporting research on obesity and ending discrimination against people with obesity. Phone 1-800-98-OBESE (1-800-986-2373) or phone 202-776-7711.

The Council on Size and Weight Discrimination Inc. (<http://www.cswd.org/>) provides information on eating disorders, "sizism", the non-dieting movement and size discrimination. Phone: (914) 679-1209.

The Rudd Institute (<http://www.yale.edu/rudd/obesity.html>) contends that obesity affects more people in the United States now than any other time in history, yet most people are unaware of the harmful impact that myths and stereotyping have on obese individuals.

The National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (<http://www.naafa.org/>) provides support and attempts to eliminate discrimination against fat people. It provides information to health professionals on how to treat very large patients. Phone: (916) 558-6880.

ObesityHelp (<http://obesityhelp.com/>) founded in 1998, this internet meeting place serves as a resource for obesity and bariatric weight loss surgery. The service connects patients, surgeons, hospitals, physicians and others battling the consequences of obesity.

The President's Challenge

The President's Challenge works to promote the development of physical fitness facilities and programs. It offers a variety of testing, recognition and incentive programs. Phone: 1-800-258-8146.

Shape down

Shapedown is a weight management program for children and adolescents. It was developed at the University of California San Francisco School of Medicine and includes contributions from nutrition, exercise physiology, endocrinology, psychology, family therapy, adolescent medicine, family medicine and behavioral and developmental pediatrics. *Shapedown* is continually reviewed and revised to ensure that it reflects current scientific and clinical understandings. The program helps kids and teens enhance their self-esteem, improve peer relationships, adopt healthier habits and begin to normalize their weight within their genetic potential. Parents feel better about their parenting and about their child. The family becomes healthier and closer. The results of *Shapedown* go far beyond weight.

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Several studies have suggested that African American and Hispanic girls tend to have much more positive body images than white girls. For example, one University of Arizona study found that, while only 10 percent of the white teenage girls surveyed were happy with their bodies, 70 percent of the black teenage girls were happy with theirs (the black girls weighed more, on average, than the white girls). Is it a coincidence that black women are both far less obsessed with weight than white women and seem to suffer no significant ill health effects from even extreme levels of fatness? Researchers have been unable to find a relationship between increased mortality and body mass even among African American women who are classified as "morbidly obese".

More reading

Gallagher S. Promoting compassion, sensitivity and understanding among obese patients. *Bariatric Times*. 2004;1(1):1,8-11.

Puhl, R & Brownell KD. Bias, discrimination and obesity. *Obes Res* 2001;9(12):788-805.

