

# A Very Brief History of Obesity

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Contributing Writer

Obesity has been around a long time, but its heyday is today. The number of obese people in the world has been estimated at near a billion. By any standards obesity is a "growth industry." In China, epicenter of global economic growth, the number of obese children has grown 28 times since 1985.

The question is how did we get here? How did the human body, fitted with "thrifty genes" that allowed it to survive frequent intermittent starvation, get so big? It's a subject that literally deserves volumes, but here's a quick, individual view of some of the landmarks on the road to global and American obesity:

1. 1780's — birth of the steam engine. Steam power will eventually lead to vast industrialization of food transport, production and distribution.

2. 1820's onward — growth of railroads and steamships. Rapidly "breadbaskets" build up around the world — in the American plains, the Ukraine, the Argentine pampas and Australia, leading to vast increases in production. Steam transport provides the ability to transport grains throughout the world cheaply and effectively.

3. 1860's — beginnings of the scientifically-based chemical industry, with innovation and scientific research planned and self-reinforcing. Whole new ways of growing food (nitrates) and preserving food will develop.

3A. Development of electric lights. Sleep, down to 8.5 hours per night in the era of industrialization, eventually declines to less than seven hours a night in the 1990's, as night turns into day,

and people begin to work continuously around the clock.

4. 1903 — the patenting of trans-fats. New kinds of fats are developed, like Crisco, that can stay on shelves for years, and be transported anywhere.

5. 1890's forward — the rise of the car. A new urban design changes how people live. Large populations can now live far from cities yet work in them, and no longer transport themselves to most spots on foot or by horse. As the car comes to dominate transport, mass transit declines, especially after World War II.

6. 1890's onward — the rise of the supermarket. Standardized foods and products allow for rise of processed foods laden with salt and fats for preservation and taste.

7. World War II — the United States finishes the war with 50% of world industrial production. Through the Marshall Plan, the U.S. rebuilds Europe, and becomes the model for industrialization and urban life worldwide.

8. 1950's on — interstate highway system. Cars literally go where no other transport system goes. Railways decline.

9. 1950's on — the rise of television — why play outside in the cold when you can watch comfortably at home? By the 1990's, Americans watch TV four hours a day.

10. 1950's on — the Green Revolution. Using pesticides and new crop varieties,



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starving nations around the world transition to net food exporters.

11. 1960's growth of agricultural subsidies. "Breadbasket" America increases its payments to farmers for specific crops, particularly corn and cotton. Corn, now 46% of government agricultural subsidies, is converted into dextrose, which revolutionizes supermarket foods and the fast food industry. American agricultural production progresses from 2,600 calories to 3,200 calories per person by 1980, and near 4,000 calories today. This represents about twice the calories people need. Much of the excess calories go into snack foods and sodas, fueling a booming obesity epidemic.

12. 1970's — rise of the computer and knowledge industries. Many of the best paying jobs involve sitting, looking at a screen.

13. 1960's on — urban sprawl — the car replaces human locomotion for most transport, especially in the U.S., where only 10% of trips are done under one's own power. Sidewalks disappear as people roll from the kitchen into their cars.

The growth of the obesity epidemic has many causes. Almost none of them were "planned," with the possible exceptions of the oil and auto companies buying up and destroying mass transport systems to aid the supremacy of the car. A population that walked to work drives. A population that ate local produce now eats salt, sugar and fat laden processed

foods whose main ingredients were produced 1,500 to 2,500 miles away. School kids who played in the neighborhood and biked to school are transported to class and play dates in SUVs and vans, then return home to sit with gameboys.

But it doesn't have to be this way. One way out of the morass is to look, like any sensible engineer, at the basic layout of the problem — the human body. Human design appears to decree that humans are built to eat whole plant foods and fish; move under their own steam much of the day; and take enough time for rest and sleep. Without these elements our regenerative powers do not have full play, making it simpler for us to age rapidly and die.

The answer isn't complicated. You just need three letters — FAR, standing for Food, Activity and Rest. You eat, move, rest, through the day. You recognize that your body operates on the principle "Use It or Lose It." You realize that your constantly regenerating body needs to be actively engaged, which allows your muscles to grow and resculpt, your brain to learn, your arteries to clear and renew. If we learn to start going FAR, we need not end with an obese, diabetic population, checking their watches every hour to figure out what pills to take, waiting for their feet to fester with infections, their heart and brain arteries to clog and die. Three letters can save a lot of lives. They can also make life much more rewarding.

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