



## Background Beliefs

Student Handout #3: **Two-thirds Are Overweight, and We're Still Debating?**

By Kelly D. Brownell

The prevalence of obesity has increased in every corner of the world. Fully two-thirds of adults are overweight or obese, and rates in children have more than tripled in the last 30 years. Obesity, diabetes and a cascade of other diseases are affected by styles of modern living, in particular poor diet and physical inactivity. Permitting the status quo invites disease, disability and suffering beyond what healthcare systems can handle.

It is sad that we debate this issue at all, but it is part of a predictable cultural script. The media strive to present two sides of every issue, even if one side is held by only a few people. Enter the contrarian -- the press needs someone to disagree. Some questioned Newton's law of gravity long after it was clear he was right. Today a handful of people claim that global warming is a myth and that cigarettes do not cause lung cancer. The contrarians make themselves even more newsworthy by adding in conspiracy claims that profits or fame drive their opponents and that some "establishment" suppresses the truth.

One can always, always find contrary studies, even in cases such as obesity, in which a large and compelling body of scientific evidence shows that it is a prevalent, growing and dangerous global health problem. When a great many studies are done, some will show negative results by chance alone or by virtue of weak methods.

So we continue debating whether obesity increases risk for medical, social and economic disadvantage, distracting us from a more important question -- what can be done? You and I do agree on a key issue -- that treating obesity is costly and difficult. The problem screams out to be prevented, leading to a conclusion we both embrace -- diet and physical activity must be improved. This conclusion is easily reached. The real challenge is to identify ways to stimulate these changes on a massive scale. More on this later in the week.

I agree with you that there is a pervasive stigma directed at overweight individuals and that the bias and outright discrimination it generates should cease. I stand shoulder to shoulder with you in fighting for this end. Studies have shown clear patterns of discrimination aimed at overweight people in employment, education and healthcare. My colleagues and I hear a continuous stream of heartbreaking stories from people teased and bullied as children - the damage lasts a lifetime.

I have heard you say that fighting obesity by definition fights obese individuals and

hence contributes to the stigma. We must prevent this, I agree, but we can fight a disease while protecting those who have it. There are many parallels. We deplore AIDS as a disease but have compassion for those who contract it. We can battle depression, alcoholism and cancer but fight for the rights of those who suffer. People with weight problems deserve kindness, compassion and the same civility afforded all citizens. The nation seeks to reduce rates of cancer, depression, alcoholism and AIDS and must take a similar stance with obesity.

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Source: "How Obese Are We," L.A. Times, September 17, 2007.

<http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-op-dustup17sep17,0,109330.story>