

Obesity: An Economic Issue?

What is Obesity?

Obesity is a disease that affects nearly one-third of the adult American population (approximately 60 million). The number of overweight and obese Americans has continued to increase since 1960, and the number continues to increase. Today, 64.5 percent of adult Americans (about 127 million) are categorized as being overweight or obese. Each year, obesity causes at least 300,000 deaths in the U.S., and healthcare costs of American adults with obesity amount to approximately \$100 billion.

The prevalence of obesity in Wisconsin has steadily increased from 18% in 1994 to 21% in 2003. The following data helps demonstrate the prevalence of obesity in Couleecap’s four county service area:

	Crawford	La Crosse	Monroe	Vernon
10-Year Obesity Prevalence (1994-2003) **	22%	17%	29%	22%
Pre-Pregnancy BMI (Body Mass Index) % Overweight *	Data not available	38.8%	46.2%	51.7%
At Risk of Overweight Children 2-4 years % 85 th - < 95 th *	24.3%	18.7%	15.2%	13.6%
Overweight Children 2-4 years % ≥ 95 th *	10.8%	14.3%	16.5%	12.7%

Sources: ** Wisconsin Medical Journal 2005, Volume 104, No. 5

* 2004 PedNSS and 2004 PNSS Reports, WIC Nutrition Education Needs Assessment

The Link between Obesity and Poverty

At first, one might think that obesity and poverty aren’t linked. One might assume that if a person is obese, they must have more than enough to eat. But this is simply not true. The highest rates of obesity and type 2 diabetes (a serious health condition linked to weight) are found among groups with the highest poverty rates, and the least education. “We think of obesity as being predicted by genetics; believe me, it is also predicted by incomes and zip codes,” says Dr. Adam Drewnowski, director of the Center for Public Health Nutrition at the University of Washington-Seattle. Low-income families have less access to affordable healthy foods. The reasons can be complex but include food pricing and marketing, school and work schedules, and/or transportation and access to the nearest grocery store.

Federal researchers are currently studying the relationship between lower incomes and higher percentages of overweight, but some government statistics already demonstrate a link:

- About 60.5% of people who earn \$15,000 to \$75,000 are overweight or obese, compared with 56% of people who earn more than \$75,000, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s 2002 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System survey.
- According to the National Health Interview Survey from 1999-2001, 26% of people living below the poverty level were obese, compared with 18% of those with incomes of \$67,000 or more.

Researchers have found several major trends in the American diet, which can be described as more calories, more refined grains, more added sugars, and more added fats. The reasons behind these trends are largely economic, says Drewnowski. “Energy-dense foods rich in starch, sugar, or fat are the cheapest option for the consumer. As long as the healthier lean meats, fish, and fresh produce remain more expensive, obesity will continue to be a problem for the working poor,” Drewnowski says.

In the U.S., food is generally inexpensive; however the struggle of the working poor comes from the rise in the cost of other necessities. Even though food overall is not necessarily expensive, low-income families end up using at least 50% of their budget on food; so they are forced to select less expensive but more energy-dense foods to maintain dietary energy.

Foods like fruits and vegetables that have a high water content allow a person to feel pretty full quickly. However, because energy-dense foods have compacted calories with very little water, a person has to consume a lot more calories for the same feeling of fullness. Energy-dense foods not only provide more calories per unit weight, but can provide more empty calories per unit cost. These foods include French fries, soft drinks, candy, cookies, deep-fried meats, and other fatty, sugary, and salty items. In the average low-income family diet, about half the calories come from added sugars and fats. Previous studies have shown that energy-dense foods may fail to trigger internal signals within the body that enough food has been consumed. These failed signals lead to overeating and overweight. Paradoxically, trying to save money on food may be a factor in the current obesity epidemic.

What’s the Cost of Eating Healthy?

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans set by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) describes a healthy diet as one that:

- Emphasizes fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products;
- Includes lean meats, poultry, fish, beans, eggs, and nuts; and
- Is low in saturated fats, trans fats, cholesterol, salt (sodium), and added sugars.

The following are two samples of menus for a day. Menu #1 is a sample menu from MyPyramid.gov and Menu #2 is a typical day’s meal for a low-income family. Even though Menu #1 and Menu #2 have similar calorie amounts, Menu #2 does not provide the proper nutrients a person needs for a healthy diet:

	Menu #1	Menu #2
Breakfast	Breakfast burrito (1 flour tortilla, 1 scrambled egg, 1/3 cup black beans, and 2 tablespoons salsa), 1 cup orange juice, and 1 cup fat-free milk	1 cup frosted flakes cereal, 2 slices white toast with 1 tablespoon margarine, 1 cup orange juice
Lunch	Roast beef sandwich (1 whole grain bun, 3 ounces lean roast beef, tomato, romaine lettuce, sautéed mushrooms, mozzarella cheese, and mustard), ¾ cup baked potato wedges with ketchup, and 1 unsweetened beverage	2 hot dogs on buns with ketchup, 1 serving of potato chips, 1 apple, 1 cup milk
Dinner	Stuffed broiled salmon (stuffed with bread stuffing mix, onions, and celery), ½ cup saffron (white) rice with 1 ounce slivered almonds, ½ cup steamed broccoli with 1 teaspoon soft margarine, and 1 cup fat-free milk	1 cup macaroni and cheese, 2 slices white bread with 1 tablespoon margarine, 1 cup carrots, 1 cup milk
Snack	1 cup cantaloupe	2 store-brand packaged cookies

It would cost a family of four, \$32.64 to purchase the items in Menu #1, while it would cost \$17.92 to purchase the items in Menu #2. Menu #1 meets all of the dietary guidelines for Americans set by the USDA for one day’s worth of food consumption, but costs almost twice as much as Menu #2. Menu #2 is very high in salt, sugars, and fats and lacks lean meats, whole grain foods, fruits, and vegetables. While many low-income families would like to choose Menu #1, they simply cannot afford it.

Low-income families often have to rely on cheaper, high calorie foods to cope with limited money for food and stave off hunger. Families try to maximize caloric intake for each dollar spent, which can lead to over consumption of calories and a less healthful diet. Research also shows that mothers restrict their food intake during periods of food insufficiency in order to protect their children from hunger. These chronic ups and downs in food intake can contribute to obesity among low-income women.

Beyond pricing, access to healthier foods could also be a problem for low-income families. Numerous studies have found that grocery stores in lower-income areas offer far fewer healthful food choices. In our area, many families rely on small grocery stores or gas stations to meet their food needs. They often have to choose from a smaller selection of food items at higher prices. Low-income families also often rely on food pantries on a regular basis, and food pantries may not have the healthiest food packages available. Lots of donated food is high in calories, sugar, and salt. Those donating to food pantries don't always donate the healthier items – its lots of packaged items that don't spoil quickly, not fresh fruits, veggies, milk, and unprocessed meats.

Helping to End the Obesity Epidemic

Many strategies for health promotion over the years have presumed that good nutrition was simply a matter of making the right choices. However, for many low-income families the “right choices” are not affordable or accessible. Solutions to the obesity epidemic will in part require that healthy food be accessible and affordable. If we want to build public education on dietary health issues, we need to create dietary guidelines and resources that are accessible, comprehensive, and take into account the resource limitations of low-income families. We also need to create easy-to-use food purchase plans that fit with many different budgets and provide all needed nutrients as well as lower overall dietary energy density.

“There is a need for governmental and policy interventions when it comes to the obesity epidemic,” Drewnowski says. “The USDA is addressing this issue with vigor. Government agencies and private foundations have identified childhood obesity as a priority area and are looking for ways to improve nutrition in schools.” In our area, the Coulee Region Childhood Obesity Coalition and the Vernon County Healthy Living Coalition are working to address overweight and obesity issues. For more information about the Coulee Region Childhood Obesity Coalition and its activities visit their website at www.childhoodobesitycoalition.org. For more information about the Vernon County Healthy Living Coalition, contact Jennifer Logging, Vernon County WIC Coordinator, at 608-637-5260.

Also, the Kane Street & Rotary South Community Gardens in La Crosse are a great source of healthy, nutrient dense foods, where low-income families can get free organically grown vegetables all summer long. For more information on these Community Gardens, contact Joanne Richmond, Hunger Task Force of La Crosse, at 608-793-1002 or visit their website at www.lacrossehtf.org.

How Can You Make a Difference?

- Donate healthy foods to your local food pantries all year round.
- Donate money to local food pantries to assist in the purchase of refrigerators and coolers.
- Plant additional rows of food in your garden to donate to local food pantries.
- Educate yourself and your family about obesity and overweight issues. Visit your local library or research websites on the Internet. Some good sites include: the American Obesity Association – www.obesity.org; the Center for Disease Control and Prevention – www.cdc.gov; Food Research & Action Center – www.frac.org; and Dietary Guidelines for Americans - www.mypyramid.gov.
- Advocate for the decrease of barriers low-income families face when applying for Food Stamps.
- Donate your time, money, or other resources to local organizations that are working to address obesity issues in your area.
- Encourage your community to sponsor free local fitness opportunities, such as walking programs.
- Be a role model within your family, organization, and community.

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