What Causes Overweight and Obesity?

Lack of Energy Balance

A lack of energy balance most often causes overweight and obesity. Energy balance means that your energy IN equals your energy OUT.

Energy IN is the amount of energy or calories you get from food and drinks. Energy OUT is the amount of energy your body uses for things like breathing, digesting, and being physically active.

To maintain a healthy weight, your energy IN and OUT don't have to balance exactly every day. It's the balance over time that helps you maintain a healthy weight.

- The same amount of energy IN and energy OUT over time = weight stays the same
- More energy IN than energy OUT over time = weight gain
- More energy OUT than energy IN over time = weight loss

Overweight and obesity happen over time when you take in more calories than you use.

Other Causes

An Inactive Lifestyle

Many Americans aren't very physically active. One reason for this is that many people spend hours in front of TVs and computers doing work, schoolwork, and leisure activities. In fact, more than 2 hours a day of regular TV viewing time has been linked to overweight and obesity.

Other reasons for not being active include: relying on cars instead of walking, fewer physical demands at work or at home because of modern technology and conveniences, and lack of physical education classes in schools.

People who are inactive are more likely to gain weight because they don't burn the calories that they take in from food and drinks. An inactive lifestyle also raises your risk for coronary heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, colon cancer, and other health problems.

Environment

Our environment doesn't support healthy lifestyle habits; in fact, it encourages obesity. Some reasons include:
• Lack of neighborhood sidewalks and safe places for recreation. Not having area parks, trails, sidewalks, and affordable gyms makes it hard for people to be physically active.

• Work schedules. People often say that they don't have time to be physically active because of long work hours and time spent commuting.

• Oversized food portions. Americans are exposed to huge food portions in restaurants, fast food places, gas stations, movie theaters, supermarkets, and even at home. Some of these meals and snacks can feed two or more people. Eating large portions means too much energy IN. Over time, this will cause weight gain if it isn't balanced with physical activity.

• Lack of access to healthy foods. Some people don't live in neighborhoods that have supermarkets that sell healthy foods, such as fresh fruits and vegetables. Or, for some people, these healthy foods are too costly.

• Food advertising. Americans are surrounded by ads from food companies. Often children are the targets of advertising for high-calorie, high-fat snacks and sugary drinks. The goal of these ads is to sway people to buy these high-calorie foods, and often they do.

Genes and Family History

Studies of identical twins who have been raised apart show that genes have a strong influence on a person's weight. Overweight and obesity tend to run in families. Your chances of being overweight are greater if one or both of your parents are overweight or obese.

Your genes also may affect the amount of fat you store in your body and where on your body you carry the extra fat. Because families also share food and physical activity habits, a link exists between genes and the environment.

Children adopt the habits of their parents. A child who has overweight parents who eat high-calorie foods and are inactive will likely become overweight too. However, if the family adopts healthy food and physical activity habits, the child's chance of being overweight or obese is reduced.

Health Conditions

Some hormone problems may cause overweight and obesity, such as underactive thyroid (hypothyroidism), Cushing's syndrome, and polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS).

Underactive thyroid is a condition in which the thyroid gland doesn't make enough thyroid hormone. Lack of thyroid hormone will slow down your metabolism and cause weight gain. You'll also feel tired and weak.
Cushing's syndrome is a condition in which the body's adrenal glands make too much of the hormone cortisol. Cushing's syndrome also can develop if a person takes high doses of certain medicines, such as prednisone, for long periods.

People who have Cushing's syndrome gain weight, have upper-body obesity, a rounded face, fat around the neck, and thin arms and legs.

PCOS is a condition that affects about 5–10 percent of women of childbearing age. Women who have PCOS often are obese, have excess hair growth, and have reproductive problems and other health issues. These problems are caused by high levels of hormones called androgens.

**Medicines**

Certain medicines may cause you to gain weight. These medicines include some corticosteroids, antidepressants, and seizure medicines.

These medicines can slow the rate at which your body burns calories, increase your appetite, or cause your body to hold on to extra water. All of these factors can lead to weight gain.

**Emotional Factors**

Some people eat more than usual when they're bored, angry, or stressed. Over time, overeating will lead to weight gain and may cause overweight or obesity.

**Smoking**

Some people gain weight when they stop smoking. One reason is that food often tastes and smells better after quitting smoking.

Another reason is because nicotine raises the rate at which your body burns calories, so you burn fewer calories when you stop smoking. However, smoking is a serious health risk, and quitting is more important than possible weight gain.

**Age**

As you get older, you tend to lose muscle, especially if you're less active. Muscle loss can slow down the rate at which your body burns calories. If you don't reduce your calorie intake as you get older, you may gain weight.

Midlife weight gain in women is mainly due to aging and lifestyle, but menopause also plays a role. Many women gain about 5 pounds during menopause and have more fat around the waist than they did before.
Pregnancy

During pregnancy, women gain weight to support their babies’ growth and development. After giving birth, some women find it hard to lose the weight. This may lead to overweight or obesity, especially after a few pregnancies.

Lack of Sleep

Research shows that lack of sleep increases the risk of obesity. For example, one study of teenagers showed that with each hour of sleep lost, the odds of becoming obese went up. Lack of sleep increases the risk of obesity in other age groups as well.

People who sleep fewer hours also seem to prefer eating foods that are higher in calories and carbohydrates, which can lead to overeating, weight gain, and obesity.

Sleep helps maintain a healthy balance of the hormones that make you feel hungry (ghrelin) or full (leptin). When you don't get enough sleep, your level of ghrelin goes up and your level of leptin goes down. This makes you feel hungrier than when you're well-rested.

Sleep also affects how your body reacts to insulin, the hormone that controls your blood glucose (sugar) level. Lack of sleep results in a higher than normal blood sugar level, which may increase your risk for diabetes.