

SPECIAL REPORT

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Shape

WHY WE'RE GAINING WEIGHT

AND HOW TO STOP IT NOW

Two out of every three Americans are overweight or obese. In this in-depth look at the country's growing obesity crisis, *Shape* uncovers why we've become such a weighty nation and what you can do to win the war on fat.

BY MICHELE BENDER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX CAO



When it comes to weight, we're a nation way out of balance. On one side of the scale are the 130 million Americans — *and more important, half of women between the ages of 20 and 39* — who are overweight or obese. On the other side is our collective ability to ignore the possibility that the problem applies to us (and yes, even possibly you) individually. Everyone knows we're in the middle of an obesity crisis; we just don't think we could be part of it. In a recent survey by the International Food Information Council Foundation, one-third of people who are overweight (meaning they have a body mass index, or BMI, of 25–29), say they're at an *ideal* weight. Even more shocking, nearly three-fourths of those who fit the classification of obese (BMI of 30 or greater) believe they are merely overweight. (To see where you fit in, see "Am I at a healthy weight?" page 186.)

Not fessing up to this weight problem can spell big trouble: "Obesity leads to diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer, to name just a few crucial health worries," says Thomas Wadden, Ph.D., president of NAASO, The Obesity Society, the leading scientific organization dedicated to the study of obesity. In fact, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, obesity is rapidly overtaking smoking as the leading cause of preventable deaths.

Just why have we become so fat?

When *Shape* posed that question to the country's leading obesity researchers, they outlined eight main reasons, below, that our scales are hitting record highs. Even better, they gave us the skinny on what to do to reverse the trend. Whether you want to drop 10 pounds or 50 pounds, your blueprint for success is on these six pages. Before rushing to put these expert strategies into action, though, spend a few minutes taking the quiz on page 187. By identifying your weight-loss personality, you'll increase your chances of sticking with a healthy weight-loss program. And, when it comes to dropping those extra pounds for good, *that's* the most important thing.

1

We're using our genes as an excuse.

Most people blame weight gain on their DNA, and that has some merit — but it's not the only, or even the primary, reason. "Genes *do* play a role in how your body burns calories and stores fat, and therefore help determine your susceptibility to becoming overweight or

obese," says Wadden, who's also the director of the Center for Weight and Eating Disorders at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. Yet a bigger culprit than our chromosomes, say experts, is our behavior, specifically the unhealthy lifestyle choices we make. "It's like inheriting a house. You're given the building and the land, but you can decide how you want to redecorate it," explains Linda Spangle, R.N., a weight-loss coach in Broomfield, Colo., and the author of *100 Days of Weight Loss* (Sunquest Media, 2006). "Likewise, even if you've inherited a tendency toward gaining weight, it's *you* who makes the choice about how you're going to eat and exercise."

What to do about it now Refuse to let heredity keep you from adjusting your diet and exercise habits so you can slim down. It's true that you may never become a size 2, but you *can* lose some

weight. Research shows that simply shedding 5–10 percent of your current weight can lower your blood pressure and has a significant impact on your risk of heart disease and diabetes. That's a manageable 9–18 pounds for a woman who weighs 180 pounds.

2

We're eating too often.

It wasn't that long ago that the pharmacy was a place where you picked up prescriptions and the gas station was where you fueled your car. Today you can get M&M's with your medicine and feed your stomach when you fill your tank. "Eating has become a recreational pastime. It has lost its power to mark a special occasion, satisfy true hunger or serve a nutritional purpose," Wadden says. Plus, a lot of what we grab on the go are packaged foods, which tend to be high in fat, sugar and calories and are big contributors to weight gain. "Most of these foods lack nutritional value or fiber, so you don't feel satisfied unless you eat big servings," says Lisa Young, Ph.D., R.D., an adjunct professor of nutrition at New York University, and author of *The Portion Teller* (Morgan Road Books, 2005).

What to do about it now

Your daily food intake should consist of three meals and two snacks, period. For a woman trying to maintain her weight, that's about 2,000 calories a day. If you're trying to lose weight, trim that number by 300–500 calories. A simple way to cut calories: "Eat fewer processed foods (think crackers, cookies and cakes) — which tend to be higher in fat and sugar — and more fresh fruit and vegetables and whole grains," Young says. Another important strategy that works for those who have lost weight and kept it off for good: Be sure



A SIMPLE CALORIE-CUTTING STRATEGY:

Eat fewer processed foods and more fresh fruit and vegetables.

which packs in calories. On those occasions when you do eat out, don't be afraid to make special requests: Ask the waiter to serve dressings or sauces on the side or to substitute a salad or extra serving of vegetables for french fries. To reduce the temptation to clean your plate, have half your entree packed in a doggie bag before it's even brought to the table. If possible, decide beforehand what you're going to order to avoid being tempted by the sights and smells of hard-to-resist foods. For chain restaurants, check their websites for nutritional info; for smaller restaurants, call ahead and ask about the menu (they may even fax you a copy).

> Keep treats tiny. Don't cut out high-calorie favorite foods; doing so will only set up a cycle in which you deprive yourself, then overindulge. Instead, have them in small portions less often. Rather than think "I can never eat cookie-dough ice cream again," plan to have a kid-sized cone once a week. That way when cravings hit, you'll know the right way to indulge.

4 We're eating way too much sugar.

"One of the major changes in our food supply over the last 40 years is the introduction of high fructose corn syrup (HFCS)," Wood says. Today, HFCS represents more than 40 percent of the caloric sweeteners added to foods and beverages — and it's in everything from soda and frozen yogurt to bread and ketchup. The problem? HFCS encourages overeating

because it fails to trigger the necessary chemical messengers that tell the brain the stomach is full, explains

Susan M. Kleiner, Ph.D.,

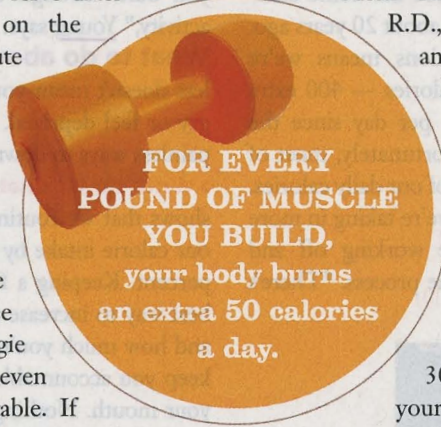
R.D., a sports nutritionist and owner of High

Performance Nutrition in Mercer Island, Wash.

"Without these messengers, your appetite has no shut-off mechanism. You can take in as many as 300 calories, and

your body will barely acknowledge that you've

consumed any calories at all." In fact, research shows that the increased use of HFCS in this country — in 1970, we each ate about a half-pound per year and by 2001, we were consuming nearly 63 pounds annually (that's 313 calories per day!) — actually mirrors the rapid increase in obesity. There's no doubt in experts' minds that HFCS plays a role.



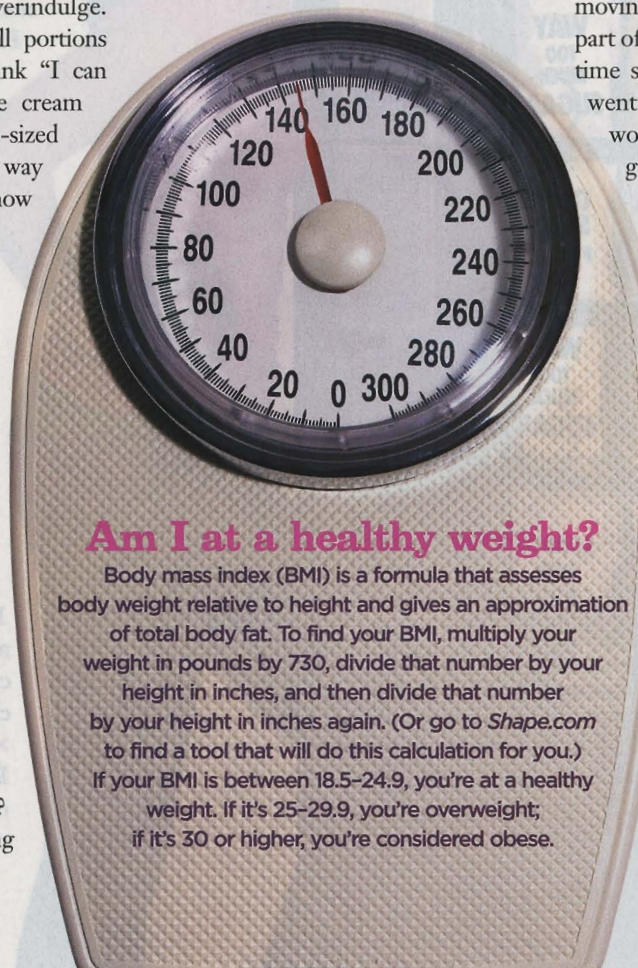
FOR EVERY POUND OF MUSCLE YOU BUILD, your body burns an extra 50 calories a day.

What to do about it now Read labels to keep foods with high concentrations of HFCS out of your shopping cart — and your mouth. If HFCS is listed first or second on the label, look at the chart that accompanies the ingredients to see how much sugar is in the food. If it's just a gram or two, don't worry. "But if it has 8 or more grams of sugar and HFCS is among the first three ingredients, buy something else," says Kleiner. Since about two-thirds of all HFCS consumed in the United States is from beverages, that's the first place you should cut back (a 12-ounce can of soda has as much as 13 teaspoons of HFCS).

5 We're not moving enough.

"In the last 25–30 years, we've gone from being a service economy [walking, moving, lifting] to an information economy [based at our desks] — and with each advancement we've become more sedentary," Wadden explains. Labor-saving devices like remote controls, elevators and moving walkways in airports are just a part of the problem. "If you were a full-time secretary back in 1960, and you went from a manual typewriter to a word processor, you would have gained 10 pounds in a year just from that one change," Wadden says. Computers aren't the only reason we're burning fewer calories; we also spend a lot more time in cars instead of walking to do short-distance errands. "Many towns aren't designed to be pedestrian-friendly or to keep us active," says Eric Ravussin, Ph.D., a professor at Pennington Biomedical Research Center in Baton Rouge, La. The result: We spend more time in our seats and less time on our feet.

What to do about it now Get out and exercise. According to the CDC, more than 60 percent of us don't exercise regularly and a full 25



Am I at a healthy weight?

Body mass index (BMI) is a formula that assesses body weight relative to height and gives an approximation of total body fat. To find your BMI, multiply your weight in pounds by 730, divide that number by your height in inches, and then divide that number by your height in inches again. (Or go to Shape.com to find a tool that will do this calculation for you.) If your BMI is between 18.5–24.9, you're at a healthy weight. If it's 25–29.9, you're overweight; if it's 30 or higher, you're considered obese.

to have healthy snacks like yogurt, a small serving of nuts or a piece of fruit on hand so you're never famished; junk food always seems to call your name even louder when you're starving.

3 We're eating bigger portions.

Since the 1970s, portion sizes for every packaged food except bread have increased — some by as much as 100 percent. “Restaurant portions are also much bigger, and we’re eating out

more often for convenience,” says Young. Research shows that we now spend almost 50 percent of our food budgets eating outside the home compared to 30 percent about 20 years ago. Eating bigger portions means we’re consuming more calories — 400 extra calories per person per day since the 1980s, in fact. Unfortunately, most of us don’t keep track of our daily calories. As a consequence, we’re taking in more calories than we’re working off and gaining weight in the process. “There’s

a simple formula for weight control: If you don’t want to pack on extra pounds, don’t eat more calories than you burn through exercise and daily activity,” Young says.

What to do about it now Eating less doesn’t mean you have to go hungry or feel deprived. There are several painless ways to downsize portions:

> **Write down what you eat.** Studies show that we routinely underestimate our calorie intake by as much as 20–50 percent. Keeping a food journal is the best way to increase awareness of what and how much you’re eating — and to keep you accountable for what goes in your mouth. Nothing makes you think twice about reaching for that second glazed doughnut more than having to admit in writing that you did. (You can enter the foods you eat and track your calories at [ishape.com/diary/MealsView Action](http://ishape.com/diary/MealsViewAction), where you’ll find nutritional information for more than 16,000 generic and brand-name foods.)

> **Have smaller meals.** “Most people could keep themselves lean if they just reduced the amount of food they ate,” says Phil Wood, Ph.D., director of the division of genomics at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and the author of *How Fat Works* (Harvard University Press, 2006).

Preparing more of your meals at home, rather than relying on takeout, gives you more control. Simply fill your bowl or plate with a little less food at every meal. To get an even more accurate idea of what a reasonable serving is, use measuring cups and a food scale: For instance, the recommended serving of rice is half a cup; a serving of beef, pork or chicken is 3½ ounces.

> **Be restaurant-savvy.** Restaurant meals are notoriously oversized and often contain a lot of oil or butter,



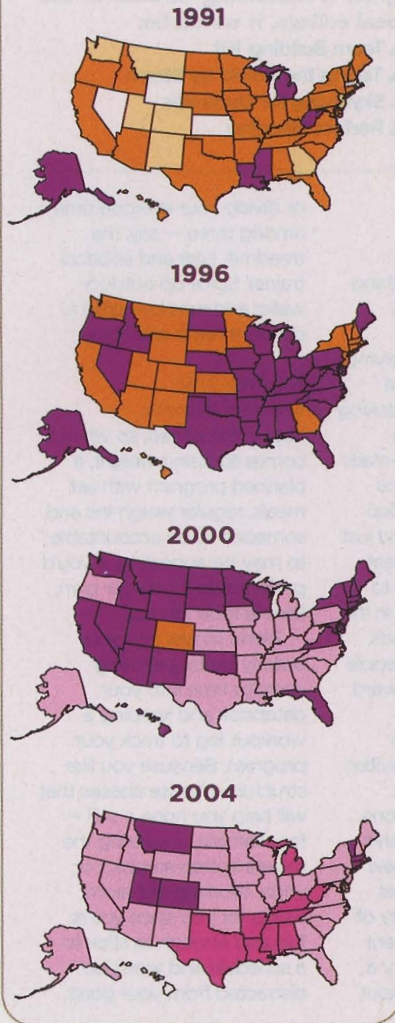
There are few healthy snack food options, but if you choose carefully, you can find some.

Our growing waistlines

In just over a decade, obesity levels have skyrocketed. Just look at these maps from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In 1991, only four states had obesity rates above 15 percent and not one had a rate above 19 percent. Today, obesity is quickly becoming the norm: Most states have rates between 20 and 24 percent. In nine states, 25–29 percent of the population is obese. If we continue on this path, some experts think everyone in the United States will be overweight or obese by the year 2030.

KEY (percent obese in the United States)

□ No Data ◻ <10% ◻ 10%-14%
 ◻ 15%-19% ◻ 20%-24% ◻ 25%-29%



percent don't exercise at all. To make up for the lack of activity in our battery-operated and computerized world, regular activity is essential. Cardiovascular workouts burn body fat and calories; muscle-building exercise, such as strength training, helps crank up a sluggish metabolism. For every pound of muscle you build, your body will burn around 50 extra calories a day.

The biggest reason we're not moving: lack of time. Ironically, even though computers have made our lives more convenient, we're now logging more hours at work and juggling everything else — families, errands and exercise — around it.

That's not to say, though, that you can't add movement back into your day-to-day life. The trick is to sneak it in by making minor tweaks. The easiest thing to do is walk or bike instead of driving whenever you can. Also try returning your grocery cart to the store (instead of leaving it in the parking lot), taking things upstairs each time you need to instead of piling them up for one big trip, hanging up the cordless phone after each call instead of leaving it on the coffee table for easy access and, a common suggestion that bears repeating, taking the stairs instead of the elevator or escalator. "Day in, day out, these small changes burn calories that can save you from putting on pounds over the years," Wood says.

Weight loss doesn't require hours in the gym or on the running track either. Glenn Gaesser, Ph.D., director of the kinesiology program at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, advises doing at least 150–200 minutes of cardio a week — that breaks down to just 20–30 minutes a day — and strength training three times a week. (Try our calorie-blasting 20-minute workout on page 190, perfect for the time-crunched because you can do it at home.)

6 We're eating when we're not hungry.

Using food to satisfy a feeling rather than a growling stomach is extremely common. In fact, 75 percent of overeating is triggered by emotions — and, not surprisingly, women are especially susceptible, according to Spangle. "We eat when we're sad, bored, tired or stressed," she says. "As a result, we've lost touch with what hunger actually feels like."

What to do about it now

The first step in overcoming emotional eating is recognizing it. Try this exercise: Before taking a bite of anything, get in the habit of questioning why you're eating it, suggests Ann Kearney-Cooke, Ph.D., a psychologist and director of the Cincinnati Psychotherapy Institute. "Ask yourself: 'Am I physically hungry or am I eating for another reason?'" If you're truly hungry, then go ahead and eat. But if it's because you're angry with your husband or stressed by a work deadline, tell yourself you have to wait 15 minutes before eating that snack. Usually the desire to eat will go away by then. If it doesn't, allow yourself to have something. Chances are, by that point, you'll eat less anyway as the wait period keeps you from shoving anything and everything in your mouth. Another trick when you're in need of a treat: Indulge yourself in ways other than eating, like reading your favorite novel or magazine. You can even store the reading material where you keep food, so when you open the cupboard you're reminded to reach for that and not the chips.

7 Our stress levels are through the roof.

"Women today are more anxious than ever because we're constantly being given the message that the more we

About 75 percent of OVEREATING IS TRIGGERED BY EMOTIONS — anger, stress, boredom and sadness.



do, the better our lives will be," Kearney-Cooke says. "As a result, many of us run around nonstop and take on too much for one day." A recent survey by the Pew Research Center, a public opinion polling and social science research center in Washington, D.C., found that 21 percent of people who frequently feel stressed say they often overeat and another 25 percent say they tend to binge on junk food. Not only do you lose your ability to make healthy choices when you're frazzled, but when you do slip, you berate yourself and then are more likely to conclude that your efforts aren't worth it at all. Plus, hormones produced when you're under stress cause the body to conserve fat, especially in the midsection.

What to do about it now It's easier said than done, but try doing other things when the stress-triggered urge to eat hits: Walk around the block, watch reruns of *Friends* or dig in the garden — anything that gives you pleasure. "You have to have other things to look forward to besides food," Kearney-Cooke says. That said, if it *is* time for a snack, you'll need to choose the right munchies. Researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Mass. found that you can boost serotonin, the body's feel-good, stay-calm hormone, by

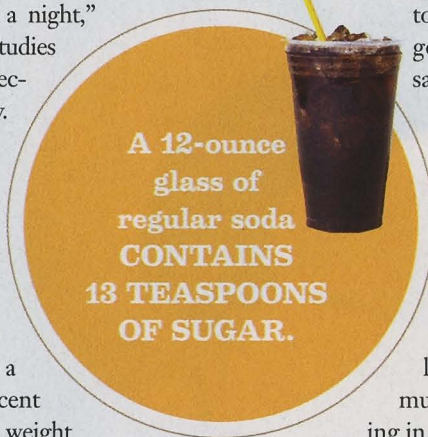
having a starchy snack that contains little or no protein. "Without serotonin you can feel down, irritable and cranky," explains Judith Wurtman, Ph.D., the study's lead researcher. Your best picks include veggie sushi rolls, rice cakes, a baked sweet potato or soy chips.

8 We're sleep-deprived.

With our go-go-go lives, we often skimp on sleep in order to squeeze everything in. "Studies show that the duration of sleep in our population has been decreasing over the last 30 years to the point where we're falling short by more than an hour a night," says Ravussin, who studies the genetic and molecular basis of obesity. One recent study conducted at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland found that, on average, women who sleep five hours or less a night are 32 percent more likely to gain weight and 15 percent more likely to be obese than those who get at least seven hours. Another new study from Laval University in Quebec, Canada, shows

that even more sleep is helpful. Researchers studied almost 750 people for 10 years and found that women who slept six to seven hours a night were 11 pounds plumper than those who snoozed seven to eight hours. Plus, previous studies suggest an association between less sleep time and greater food intake.

What to do about it now Get more shut-eye by going to bed earlier. At first it may seem hard to fall asleep before your normal time, but after about a week your body will get used to it. To help you nod off, eliminate caffeine or alcohol at least four hours before going to bed. Get up and go to bed at the same time every day (even on weekends), make sure your bedroom is cool and dark, and do something calming — like taking a warm bath or listening to soft music — before turning in. Most people need a two- to three-hour buffer zone to relax between the active part of their day and the time they go to bed so they can fall asleep. ☺



A 12-ounce glass of regular soda CONTAINS 13 TEASPOONS OF SUGAR.

The No. 1 keep-it-off strategy: Strive to be healthy, not thin.

The amount of physical activity you do is one of the strongest predictors of whether you'll maintain your weight loss, so be sure you're working out for reasons that keep you motivated. A new study shows that you're more likely to stick with your workouts and exercise longer if your incentive to break a sweat goes beyond losing weight or fitting into your skinny jeans.

Researchers at the University of Michigan found that women who exercise to lose weight or to become more toned do almost 40 percent less exercise and walk 2.5 times less than those who work out for other reasons

It's easier to pick good-for-you foods when being healthy is your goal.

like reducing stress, feeling energized or increasing their well-being. "Women who exercise to shape their bodies may feel it's something they're supposed to do, which is less motivating," says Michelle Segar, a psychology researcher who conducted the study.

Think about ways your healthy habits are enhancing your life beyond looking good in a swimsuit. For example, your workouts can boost your mood and make you feel more powerful and confident. "You don't see the heart attack that you prevented or the other diseases you're warding off," says Donald D. Hensrud, M.D., associate professor of preventive medicine and nutrition at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn. and editor of *Mayo Clinic Healthy Weight for Every Body* (Mayo Clinic, 2005). So constantly remind yourself that by keeping the weight off, you're reaping a multitude of benefits.

