

YOU ASKED



Why Are So Many

Americans Overweight?



COURTESY PHOTO

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“Individuals must cope with a food system designed to encourage them to eat more.”

BY MARION NESTLE

This is a good question, but the problem is not unique to Americans. Overweight and obesity have gone worldwide, in developing as well as industrialized countries. But no matter where overweight people live, the cause is the same: eating more calories than one expends.

Farmers Paid to Grow Food

In the United States, obesity levels began to rise in the early 1980s. Abundant evidence suggests calorie consumption began to increase at that time, though little evidence demonstrates physical activity declined.

What changed? I think an overabundance of food in the United States is a key reason that many Americans are overweight.

In the 1970s, U.S. farm policy shifted from paying farmers not to grow food to paying them to grow as much food as possible. The result was a sharp rise in calories available in the food supply: from 3,200 per person per day in 1980 to 3,900 in 2000. This increase of

700 available calories per day for every person made the food industry exceptionally competitive. Companies had to find new ways to sell their food products in a market that provided more calories than the U.S. population needed.

To sell their products in an overabundant food economy, companies invented new ways to sell more food. In doing so, they changed U.S. society in ways that promoted eating more food, more frequently, in more places, and in



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larger amounts. Food began to be sold in places that never sold it previously: business supply stores, clothing stores and bookstores. Vending machines were

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installed in schools, selling high-calorie snack foods to students. Americans also began eating out more often, and restaurants' portion sizes increased.

Better Economy = More Food

As the economies of developing countries grow, their populations want to eat more expensive foods, such as meat and processed products rich in calories, and to eat them more frequently than in the past. These newly prosperous countries have provided new markets for food companies to sell their products. So thanks to rising prosperity and an abundance of available food, the rest of the world is catching up with U.S. levels of obesity and the health problems it causes.

To prevent obesity, people need to eat fewer calories. But for perhaps the first time in history, growing numbers



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of people around the world have more calories available for consumption than they need. In the United States and other countries that have an overabundance of food, individuals must cope with a food system designed to encourage them to eat more than they need. That is why food advocates in the United States are working hard to obtain policies that will make it easier for individuals to make healthier food choices. Let's make healthy eating the default!

Growing numbers of people around the world have more calories available for consumption than they need. Advocates in the United States are working to promote policies that will make it easier for Americans to make healthier food choices.

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