

Should The U.S. Government Do More to End Obesity?

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A threat is building that faces half of all Americans, and it is not a war. The U.S. constitution gives the government the responsibility to protect its citizens from threats, but the government is losing the fight against obesity right here at home. While most people agree that the increase in obesity is a problem there is less agreement about the solution. In the article Government intervention will not solve our obesity problem Abdukadirov (2012) makes multiple arguments against government intervention to fix the obesity crisis. When Abdukadirov and other opponents of government intervention see the problem of obesity they see a problem of personal choice, one of futile government control, an argument that creates a harmful stigma, and a history of failed programs. While these arguments have merit, they are all outweighed by reality. The United States government needs to do more to end obesity; they have a responsibility to protect everyone from harm and they are failing to do so. There are multiple reasons that the government needs to step in to fight obesity. Within the current food environment, people will continue to struggle to make healthy food decisions, contributing to negative stigma around weight and mental health disorders. There have been obesity programs that have worked before that just need to be properly implemented. Positive change can be made if the work starts now.

The argument over public health has existed since public health was invented. While some people think the government should help people be as healthy as possible, there are others who think the government should stay out of the way and let people do what they want. Obesity has become too big of a problem to just let happen. According to the Centers for Disease Control (2022) 41.9% of the U.S. was obese as of March 2020. Obesity is also expensive medically, according to the Centers for Disease Control (2022) the “estimated annual medical cost of obesity in the United States was nearly 173 billion dollars in 2019.” Obesity is incredibly taxing

on our society both economically and socially. While it is important to let people make their own decisions there comes a point where we must give up some of our rights to receive protection.

Obesity effects people of all ages, according to “Child Obesity” from Harvard School of Public Health (2016) “Over the past three decades, childhood obesity rates have tripled in the U.S., and today, the country has some of the highest obesity rates in the world: one out of six children is obese, and one out of three children is overweight or obese.” If obesity can start that early in life at that high of rate there is something wrong with the environment the children are growing up in. Children who are still in the developmental phase learn eating habits quickly and will eat whatever the people raising them eat. In an article titled Childhood Obesity researchers at the Cleveland Clinic (2022) say that “Shared family behaviors such as eating habits and being inactive can contribute to childhood obesity... Busy families are consuming more foods and beverages high in fat, sugar, and calories. These foods and beverages tend to be low in vitamins, minerals, and other vital nutrients.” The way parents eat is passed down to their children who develop habits that can last their lifetime. When the government is not allowed to step in, unhealthy eating patterns flourish. Government programs can help to educate both parents and children on how to eat healthy and make it easier to make the right choices.

The types of food that we are eating may not even be the whole problem. Some sources say that the bigger problem is the availability of such a large quantity of that food. Processed food is becoming increasingly cheap and available everywhere you look. Convenience stores and restaurants both fight to provide cheap unhealthy food to as many people as possible. According to the private research university New York University (2021), “Ultra-processed food consumption grew from 53.5 percent of calories in the beginning of the period studied (2001-2002) to 57 percent at the end (2017-2018).” In the study of ultra-processed foods, the data show

a sharp increase in consumption. Fixing the environment may be easier than fixing diets. People become addicted to the foods that they are around, and if unhealthy food is all around you, then you will eat that food. Even when people know their diet is unhealthy, they continue to eat that food. Abdukadirov (2012) talks about how one solution of posting calorie counts on restaurant menus has already failed to reduce calorie consumption: “While 28 percent of patrons said the information influenced their choices, researchers could not detect a change in calories purchased after the law.” This “solution” didn’t work because it didn’t change the environment people live in, the food is still the same and it is just as easy to get. McDonalds is a notable example of food environment influencing people's choices, the daily recommended calorie intake for women is 2000 and 2500 for men, but a meal from McDonalds can easily reach 1200 calories or more. If meals of that size are the norm, how are people supposed to eat three meals a day plus snacks while maintaining a healthy calorie intake. Writing for the Washington Post Haspel (2020) says that “The obesity pandemic is the result of living in food environments where it is difficult not to overconsume calories. Full stop. It is not controversial.” Since people cannot always be trusted to make healthy choices, the government needs to step in to fix the food environment around us. A balance needs to be found between regulation and eating what you want. Haspel (2020) sums this issue up, “We need to safeguard the joy of a raised glazed, but we shouldn't have to face down that temptation everywhere we go. We must give up on the idea that people who want to lose weight can succeed in the food system we have created.” Cooperation is key: it is important that people try to fix their diets and with the support of the government, changing the food environment, a positive change can be made.

In addition to believing that the government should take a step back in changing the food environment, some people believe that government programs that encourage healthy eating put a

social stigma on being overweight. When talking about previous attempts at reducing obesity by making information about obesity more readily available Abdulkadirov (2012) says that “Not only is this method not solving the problem, we may actually be increasing the social stigma associated with weight gain.” When the government tries to tell everyone to be healthy, people who aren't healthy can feel attacked. Stigmas are bad for everyone involved, that is why instead of picking on people who are overweight, and trying to force them to change, the government needs to make it easier to eat healthy, provide education, change the food environment, and start encouraging health from an early age. There is no reason the government should force anyone to become healthy, instead they should just provide a guiding hand. Obesity is not healthy physically or mentally, in “How Excess Weight Impacts Our Mental and Emotional Health” Dorothea Vafladis (2021), director of the National Council on Aging says that obesity has been found to lead to depression along with other mental health disorders such as bipolar disorder. One of the biggest causes of these mental health issues is the inability to do things that people love. Being morbidly overweight can get in the way of doing everyday tasks like walking or even cooking dinner. Depression can also cause overeating, so a loop of feeling sad and eating is formed. Being overweight makes you no less of a human being, it doesn't make you lazy or ignorant about food choices, being overweight simply means that you weigh more than the healthy amount. Supporting people in their efforts to lose weight so they can live a healthy life is not stigmatizing obesity, it is supporting a struggling individual through life so they can live to their full potential.

There have been government programs in the past that have tried to end obesity and obesity is still around, so why should the government spend millions of taxpayer dollars on programs to end obesity? The problem with the past government acts was that they were too

little, too late. One example that was mentioned earlier is adding calories to restaurant menus, this simply isn't doing enough, to make real change the whole environment needs to be addressed. According to Aetna (n.d.), a managed health care company dedicated to reducing the cost of insurance, "Through a thoughtful combination of education programs, taxes and incentives, governments can nudge consumers and food producers in the right direction." When the government takes a holistic approach to ending obesity real progress can be made. Examples of food education programs working can be seen all over the world. Programs in Japan and China have both succeeded in bringing down mortality rate. The United States government needs to take a good look at whether the tax money is worth saving thousands of lives and millions of people from health problems.

Obesity has many facets; it has many different causes and many negative effects. Obesity starts early, and many students still in primary school are now experiencing diabetes at an unprecedented rate. The environment also plays a significant role in the spread of obesity. Obesity has led to new waves of fat shaming and a debate has popped up on whether fat shaming is a positive or negative reinforcement. Obesity also hurts your mental health more than many people think. The government has many different options to help alleviate this problem, and only through a combination of multiple of those programs will real progress be made. Before researching this essay, I knew that America was on average obese but the sheer number of people, especially young people who are obese shocked me. I am not obese myself but living in a food environment and working at a restaurant I can see how easy it is to eat too many unhealthy calories without even realizing. I work at Noodles and Company where a bowl of mac and cheese is 1200 calories. We have calories posted on our menu, but people will still order a dish plus sides which can easily add up to 1500 calories. Making people aware of the food they are

eating is not enough, the whole environment needs to be changed. According to the United Kingdom National Health Service (2019) the daily calorie intake required for a moderately active adult woman is 2000 and for men 2500 is the recommended amount. If 2500 calories is the recommended amount for the entire day, how are we supposed to eat a meal equal to 1500 calories and not go over the limit? One final point I need to reinforce is that shaming someone who is overweight does more harm than good, many people feel comfortable in their bodies and that is a good thing. While body shaming is not acceptable, I pose this question, what will happen when $\frac{3}{4}$ of our population is unable to function in society due to being drastically overweight, what will happen to our economy, our military, our fitness, our athletics, and our death rates?

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