

GLUTTON NATION

You don't have to read bulletins from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) to realize that Americans are fattening up faster than Iowa hogs in August—just stroll through your local Wal-Mart or take a close look in the mirror. According to the CDC, about 65 percent of the nation is now officially overweight¹ or obese, including this writer and—more likely than not—you, the reader.

Ever since the dawn of the T.V. era we've been concerned about our weight, but the last decade—and especially the last three years—has brought us into new and uncharted territory. Scale manufacturers are rushing to produce new high-capacity scales that can handle up to 600 pounds.² Ambulance services are replacing their gurneys with new high-capacity gurneys and winch systems in order to serve increasing numbers of heavyweight emergency victims.³

Even casket manufacturers have noticed the ballooning population of the obese. The Goliath Casket company of Lynn, Indiana, is selling record numbers of their triple-wides, a piano-crate-sized coffin that won't self-destruct—even with a 700 lb. resident.⁴

What's happened to us? It's all too tempting to blame our genes, a slow metabolism or a lack of "fat-burning" vitamins or hormones (endlessly available from eager health-store hucksters). While sci-



We've gobbled when we should have nibbled, and we've porked out when we should have been pushing back.

Let's take a little trip in our time-machine for a glimpse into where this trend began. If we're ever going to turn back the quivering needle on those groaning Health-O-Meter scales in the bathroom, we need insight into the long-term rise of a problem that doesn't have any answers.

Our Thin and Trim Ancestors

Why didn't our ancestors grow fat? And why don't today's inhabitants of poverty-stricken Third-World countries bulge in all the familiar places? Their problem was (and is) simple—they scrambled to acquire enough calories to keep body and soul together. It took hard work to grow a crop of corn, or shoot a squirrel or harpoon a seal.

In times of scarcity you were considered fortunate if you had a layer of fat to tide you over until the next rabbit hopped into your snare. Those with overactive metabolism or who were uncomfortably close to the cliff edge of malnutrition were unlikely to survive those hard winters or communal periods of

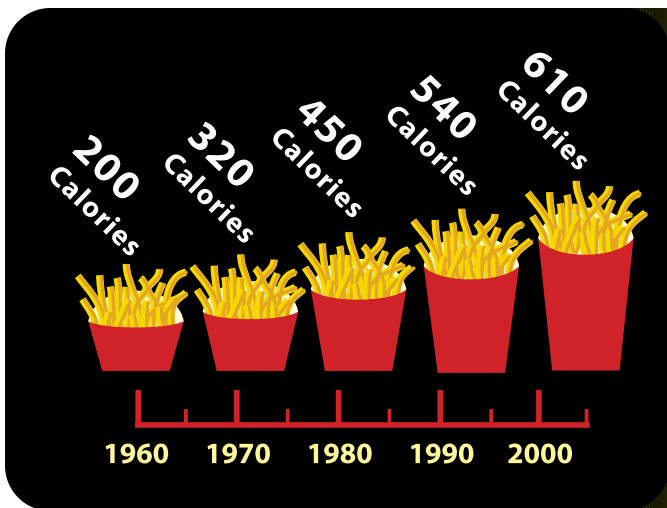
ence is struggling to create an antidote for the obesity epidemic, it's never been a mystery why we, as a nation, have tipped the scales to a point where foreign visitors, unused to public displays of extreme corpulence, marvel at acres of jiggling flesh on display in any public place. Simply put, we've made pigs out of our ourselves.

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"A serving of McDonald's french fries had ballooned from 200 calories (1960) to 320 calories (late 1970s) to 450 calories (mid-1990s) to 540 calories (late 1990s) to the present 610 calories,... In fact, everything on the menu had exploded in size. What was once a 590-calorie McDonald's meal was now 1,550 calories."
 —Greg Critser
Fatland: How Americans Became the Fattest People in the World

starvation that came along with poor crops or scarce game.

Ironically, those same biological mechanisms that helped our ancestors survive for millennia are now attempting to cope with a situation never before experienced in human history: Abundant food that is acquired with minimal or no physical labor. Our 21st century bodies, generally speaking, aren't handling this caloric superabundance with grace.

In the decades after World War II, several Pacific island groups came under the protection of the United States, and for the first time in



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history, their inhabitants had access to abundant modern foods. Instead of fishing in the lagoon, growing taro and climbing coconut palms for the traditional foods, they began to chow down on Spam, Twinkies and instant mashed potatoes. Within a generation those islanders, sucking up high-calorie goodies on Uncle Sam's nickel, were acquiring massive bodily proportions previously unknown in their history. But along with

their hefty girth came the host of health complications that accompany being overweight, especially diabetes and heart disease.⁵

The Fast Food Explosion

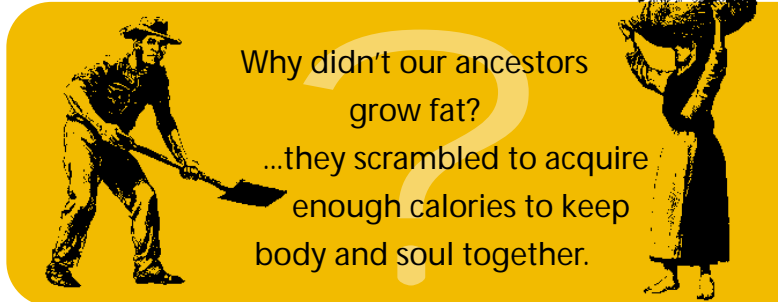
The fattening of America has followed similar lines but has been vastly accelerated by two distinct trends: Fast food and guilt-free living. America invented fast food, and while Yanks traveling abroad have often uttered prayers of thanksgiving for McDonald's whenever they need a clean bathroom in a foreign country, that corporation has probably contributed more than any other to the supersizing of Americans.

The fast food trend exploded throughout our population and penetrated food outlets from public school cafeterias to federal prisons. Cheap and abundant food in massive quantities (often available in 24-hour drive-thru's) has fueled a second cultural trend: Freedom from guilt.

Excess of any kind has become mainstream in American culture, and most view overeating as a very minor personal fault ranking near the bottom of the hierarchy of vices. Let's take these trends separately and see how each by itself represents a signif-

icant problem, but together they foreshadow an apocalyptic future of hyper-obese hedonists crushing the financial blood from an overburdened America.

The golden arches of McDonald's are to be found everywhere from



Moscow to Melbourne, but they began in the Route 66 city of San Bernardino, California.⁶ The McDonald brothers had invented a concept of making a standardized product from high-quality materials so efficiently that they could sell

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What about clothing manufacturers—are they, too, involved in the conspiracy to gluttonize America? After all, they've been making clothes available in ever-bigger sizes.

it cheaply—and still make a profit. When Ray Kroc bought the franchise in 1955, he pushed that concept to the limit, and McDonald's came to symbolize the fast-food revolution. The success of pioneers like Ray Kroc and Harland Sanders set off a gold rush of competition, and by the 1970s every family in the country was regularly eating in a fast-food outlet.



Size 8 Now... Size 8 Then

Competing fast food chains, each seeking a higher percentage of market share, lured consumers through their doors with marketing blitzkriegs never before

seen in the restaurant business. Is there anyone who lived in the 70s and 80s who isn't familiar with the slogan, "You *deserve* a break today!"⁷ or, "Where's the beef?!"⁸ By the end of the decade many families were eating several fast-food meals a week, yet the burger-wars grew ever more fierce.

Eventually the field narrowed down to a handful of calorie-laden choices: Burgers, fried-chicken, pizza and ersatz (but delicious) Mexican food. Top bigwigs at each company were asking the same question: How can we entice the already media-saturated consumer to

choose our restaurant over the one next door?

"Supersize It!"

According to Greg Critser, author of *Fatland: How Americans Became the Fattest People in the World*, McDonald's led the way with the supersized menu. "A serving of McDonald's french fries had ballooned from 200 calories (1960) to 320 calories (late 1970s) to 450 calories (mid-1990s) to 540 calories (late 1990s) to the present 610 calories," noted Critser. "In fact, everything on the menu had exploded in size. What was once a 590-calorie McDonald's meal was now 1,550 calories."⁹ Soon the entire cadre of fast-food outlets were offering more food—containing enormously more calories—for only a small increase in price.

The standard size of a machine-vended soft-drink in 1963 was six ounces. The largest size of cup sold at the convenience store next door to where I'm writing holds a massive fifty-two ounces of soda. That's *nine times* the size of the Cokes sold when Elvis was still



Large buckets led to consuming 33 percent more popcorn than those who had unlimited access to popcorn, but in smaller containers.

Surprisingly, even when the popcorn was terrible (left to become stale for two weeks) those with giant buckets ate proportionally more!

wearing blue-suede shoes and munching peanut-butter and bacon sandwiches.¹⁰

The immediate effect of supersizing soon became obvious: Americans ate a *lot* more fast food than before, but were spending only a little more. In fact, competition and production efficiency in food production led to real bargains in fast food. In 1970 Americans spent about \$6 billion on fast food. By 2000 it was over \$110 billion.¹¹ The not-so-obvious impact of the "would-you-like-twice-as-much-for-a-dime-more?" concept was more significant: It gave the green-light to gluttony.

Guilt-free Gluttony

How many customers would waltz into Wendy's in 1970 and order two singles and three orders of fries? Yet that's the caloric equivalent of many of the combos available in almost all fast-food outlets. This sales device led to the normalizing of eating massive quantities of food. We assume that whatever portions are sold are appropriate portions for us to eat, and have become socially conditioned to eat hugely more than our parents would have considered normal—and thousands more calories than our body requires.

The word for this—one almost never heard today—is *gluttony*. It's an ugly-sounding word with an even more grotesque meaning: An inordinate desire to consume more than that which one requires.¹²

Gluttony is one of the seven deadly sins, a collection of transgressions that was as well known to those of the medieval period as the characters in *Friends* are to modern Americans. But, much like its companions (pride, envy, lust, anger, greed and sloth), gluttony is not a fashionable concept. In fact, the modern tendency is to regard them as meta-virtues.

For example, only a wimpy sort of girlie-man would shun anger should he be "dissed" or summarily cut off while cruising the freeway. The classic McDonald's slogan, "You deserve a break today!" somehow manages to combine concepts



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drawn from sloth, pride and gluttony all in a single five-word phrase. And lust is hardly regarded as a negative concept, as we hear at countless funerals to the effect that the dearly-departed had an “insatiable lust for life.”

Our ancestors seldom had as much as they could eat, but when they did, at least they were aware of the corrosive lure of gluttony. Our circumstances have conspired to rob us of all awareness that we are eating more than we should. Think about it: They serve food in



SUPER SIZE ME

A film of epic portions!

Not since “Bowling for Columbine” has a documentary had such a weighty impact on the national psyche. *Super Size Me* is the story of filmmaker Morgan Spurlock’s cross-country quest to discover why America is the fattest country in the world. On the journey he interviews health experts, from the Surgeon General to gym teachers, professionals who share their research and their “gut-feelings” on America’s ever-expanding girth. During the trip, Spurlock subjects his own body to a 30-day McDonald’s-only diet and (though starting out in above-average health) he develops high cholesterol, his liver almost collapses, he becomes lethargic, and he gains 25 pounds!

portions— isn’t it reasonable to assume that those proportions are appropriately sized? And what about clothing manufacturers—are they, too, involved in the conspiracy to gluttonize America? After all, they’ve been making clothes available in ever-bigger sizes.

In fact, there has been a tendency to “re-size” clothes to the extent that a size-8 dress from a vintage clothing store is considerably smaller than many modern size-8 dresses.¹³ Since we gain weight slowly, we gradually re-equip ourselves with suitably roomy clothes—and barely notice our underwear size creeping from 32 to 36 to 40.

The *normalization of excess* has tended to erase almost all the signals that tell us, “That’s enough! In fact, that’s *too much!*” One researcher, Brian Wansink, at the University of Illinois, was interested in studying satiety—the level at which someone reached a point of satisfaction and voluntarily stopped eating. His experimental equipment included trick soup bowls that refilled from a secret reservoir. The experimental subjects who slurped from those bottomless bowls sucked down 40 percent more soup than those who could eat “all they wanted” from regular bowls simply by getting refills.

In another experiment, one group of moviegoers was given free popcorn in small containers and others were supplied with giant-sized buckets. The large buckets led to consuming 33 percent more popcorn than

those who had unlimited access to popcorn, but in smaller containers. Surprisingly, even when the popcorn was terrible (left to become stale for two weeks) those with giant buckets ate proportionally more! Wansink’s research tells us one important fact: We no longer know when we’ve eaten an appropriate amount.¹⁴



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So we’re clueless about our intake, but we’re also equally in the dark about the amount of calories we’re expending. And how many does our body *need*, actually? There are only a few variables, mostly involving genetics, metabolism (which may have a large genetic component), and the rate at which we burn the calories we take in. If the intake-rate matches the burn-rate, we maintain our weight. Obviously the equation has become unbalanced. One thing we know, however—despite the boom in gym memberships—we’re not exercising off nearly as much as

Where's the Beef Now?

we're piling on. While our ancestors walked miles to school (through the snow, as my father often reminded me), today we're driven, flown, bussed, shuttled, elevated and people-moved to an increasing extent. Every modern airport now has lengthy stretches of moving walkway, yet a surprisingly large percentage of travelers—most of whom are desperately in need of exercise—see these as an opportunity to take a break from the drudgery of walking.

Are Fads, Lawsuits and Legislation the Solution?

So what's the solution? Now that the obesity epidemic has exploded on the public consciousness a host of would-be saviors are weighing in with proposals ranging from the implausible to the ludicrous. The diet book shills promote one fad regimen after another and have succeeded in making the diet book the single most profitable segment of the non-fiction publishing industry.¹⁵ The bulk of talk-radio in America is funded by a shady combination of would-be lenders and health hucksters promoting weight-loss nostrums that, despite FDA finger-waving, promise that you can "eat as much as you want and *still* lose weight."

Virtually every diet book or supplement promoted to the overweight masses succeeds to the exact extent that the consumer is motivated to embrace a combination of reduced food intake and expanded exercise. And the dieter's success (measured

by a downward trend in weight) continues precisely as long as that motivation remains in place. Sadly, that's usually not for long. If the dieter actually reaches a desirable weight, that's the signal for resuming all the old lifestyle habits that led to obesity in the first place. And if the dieter doesn't see progress—well, time to try another diet, pill or appetite-suppressing gimmick.

Real scientists are just as eager as the health-quacks to develop a medically sound method of controlling weight. After all, the pharmaceutical industry saw the brief reign of "Phen-Fen"¹⁶, a diet-drug combination that actually worked (but was withdrawn due to its nasty habit of damaging heart valves) as a foretaste of the riches to be reaped if a medical solution to obesity could be developed. The prospect of legal challenges has raised the stakes in the struggle to deliver a miracle "obesity pill," but several promising versions are in development. The Pfizer pharmaceutical company, for example, hopes to market an appetite suppressant that helps

Fast-Food Franchise Facelift

Confronted with increasing pressure from consumer groups and legislators—and with at least partial blame for the American obesity epidemic—McDonalds in April announced a new health and anti-obesity campaign. The nation's largest purveyor of fast food is offering new, healthy entree salads and adult "Happy Meals" packaged with bottled water and pedometers to encourage walking.

Since then, other chains have followed suit, giving fast food aficionados greater and more nutritious choices.

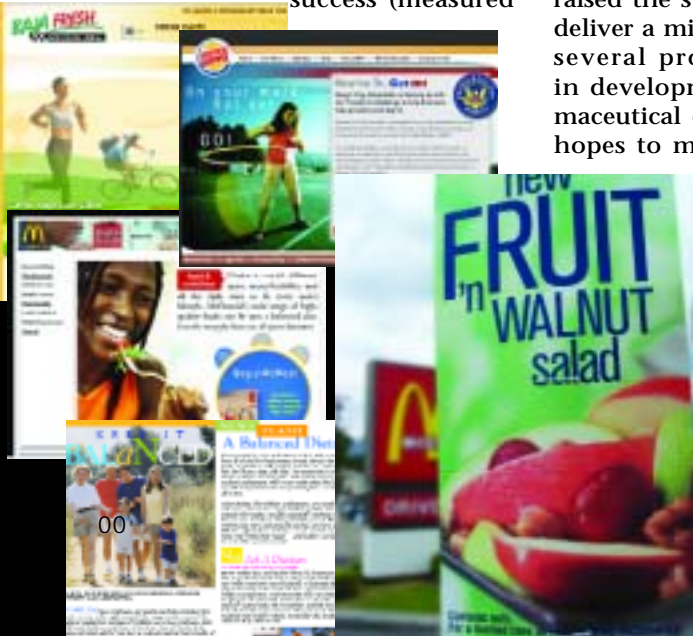
But some observers are skeptical as to whether the fast food giants really have their customers' best interests at heart. The menu changes seem timed not merely to avert bad publicity, but to forestall costly government regulations, such as required nutrition information on menus and packages. Even more painful to the fast food industry would be legislation barring fast food from public school lunch menus and the loss of lucrative contracts.

But when all is said and done—will most people go to McDonalds for the fresh fruit and salads—or for the sensory satisfaction that can only be delivered by a Big Mac and fries?

THE PLAIN TRUTH



Health, fitness, fruits and veggies are increasingly emphasized in food advertising. Is this just for show or are we really changing our ways?





Even if an effective and safe appetite suppressant ever emerges from the pharmaceutical industry, will every overweight individual even want to take it? Let's face facts: We *like* to eat, and we like to eat *more* than we need.

Kalahari Desert bushmen to keep hunger under control while hunting.¹⁷

While the medical profession attacks our obesity crisis on one front, the trial lawyers have rushed to help overweight Americans through the magic of class-action lawsuits. One such would-be food-nanny ("don't touch that donut!") is Richard Banzham, law professor and veteran of the anti-tobacco jihad.¹⁸ He is one of many attorneys who see the food industry as collectively guilty of conspiring to provide tasty and fattening food on purpose, in effect enticing the hapless consumer to munch his way to involuntary obesity. Their solution is a mix of legislation and class-action lawsuits designed to force food manufacturers to de-fat their offerings with a one-two series of punches, first with an uppercut of restrictive legislation followed by a gut-slam to the pocketbook.

Initial lawsuits have not been tremendously successful, at least partly due to the clever counter-satire generated by the Center for Consumer Freedom. The center is an alliance of food suppliers and restaurant chains who have managed to keep the idiocy of the "McDonald's Made Me Fat!" lawsuits in the public eye.

Despite the hopes of would-be food-nannies, it's unlikely that legislation or lawsuits can turn the tide against creeping obesity. Their efforts might lead to significant improvements in labeling, such as requiring that trans-fats¹⁹ be clearly labeled, or requiring that caloric content be indicated in more understandable terms. After all, which would be more helpful to the bariatrically challenged: The knowledge that six Oreos contain 270 calories (and 12 grams of fat),²⁰ or that those

270 calories will take almost an hour of brisk walking to burn off?²¹

Fighting Obesity

The fact is that the food business is driven by customer desires, and as long as we want great taste, yummy texture and excellent value we'll be served high-fat (taste and texture) foods in colossal quantities (value). Even if an effective and safe appetite suppressant ever emerges from the pharmaceutical industry, will every overweight individual want to take it? Let's face facts: We *like* to eat, and we like to eat *more* than we need. Until we come to grips with the root desires that drive our appetites the outcome is inevitable: Either an endless cycle of binges and diets or a steadier (but more deadly) upward trend toward obesity and disability.

It is presently popular to be "non-judgmental" and to avoid stamping self-destructive behaviors with moral labels. But unless we recognize over-eating as a moral failure, traditionally known as gluttony, we remain helpless to enlist some very real allies into our battle. Christians have always relied on God's power to resist moral failure, and—even more important—to continue the struggle despite repeated failures. Just as every alcoholic takes the first step toward recovery when he looks squarely in the mirror and says, "I am an alcoholic," those of us who overeat need to take a good look at ourselves and admit, "I eat too much."

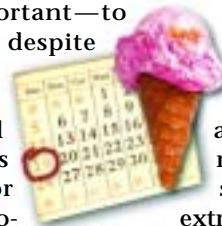
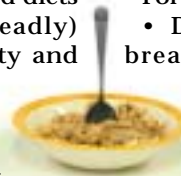
Many of the mechanisms effectively used by recovering alcoholics can be brought to bear in the fight against over-indulgence, chief of

which is relying on Jesus Christ to live his resurrected life in us, enabling us to conquer self-indulgence. On a practical level, just as recovering drunks must avoid bars, cocktail parties and liquor stores, recovering gluttons need to avoid not only the usual fast-food outlets, but also places where mass quantities of high-fat food are purchased (warehouse stores) and consumed (the sofa in front of the T.V.).

While there are many complex reasons for obesity, and while being obese is not necessarily a commentary on our relationship with God, as Christians we can fight over-indulgence by restricting ourselves to predefined amounts.

For example:

- Develop standard menus for breakfast (oatmeal five days a week) and lunch (drinkable yogurt or Subway's sandwiches from their 6-grams-of-fat-or-less menu).
- Don't hang around places or people likely to defeat your goal.
- Eat only half of every restaurant-sized meal.
- Avoid desserts.
- Eat ice cream only when a really rare flavor is available (in my case, pistachio).
- Seek appropriate exercise, even if it's only walking. Walk as much as you can, even if it means buying comfortable shoes or keeping an extra set at the office. My son gave me a pedometer for my birthday.²² I can clip it to my waistband and at the end of the workday check to see if I've walked five miles. If not, I can change my behavior the next day to make sure I do.



- Make sure you know what you weigh. I well know how tempting it is to avoid scales when I suspect that I've gained weight. The antidote is to weigh yourself *every* day, preferably nude as soon as you get up. And be sure that your scale is both accurate



and precise. I found it helpful to know my weight within a tenth of a pound²³ and track it on a daily graph pinned to the wall of my bathroom.

- Find allies who will support you in your recovery. If you're lucky, your spouse could be your best ally. Find ways to encourage your recovery-partners frequently, and that includes steering them away from miracle fat-burning pills and quack diets and in the direction of a lifestyle reorientation aimed at moderate (i.e. necessary for life) consumption and appropriate exercise.



Accepting Personal Responsibility

Despite our society's current obsession with conquering obesity, it is difficult to accept personal responsibility for obesity. Yet, this is a critical first step, followed by our faith in God. Perhaps the pill-fairy will one day deliver a miraculous (and safe) appetite suppressant—but that may be years away, and in the meantime we need to find a way to live wisely in the here and now.

Despite the claims of the latest diet fad, they all have the same fatal flaw: They're *diets*, and not long-term lifestyles that we can live with until the day when the nursing home staff is choosing the color of our Jello. The "cabbage and cream-cheese" diet might work for a month, but can you stomach it for forty years?

We have only one hope for redemption from the gluttony trap, and that's to first realize that over-indulgence is wrong and take appropriate action: Repentance

followed by a modified (and supernaturally directed) lifestyle. For some of us it will be a long and difficult journey, and even the best outcome is unlikely to attract admiring looks as we lounge by the pool, but there's no future in refusing to take the first step.

What is that first step? Look in the mirror. Repeat after me, "I eat too much." Come to terms with the fact that you *choose* to overeat, you *choose* inactivity and you *choose* to avoid accountability.

The spokesman for a popular weight-loss product currently touted on talk radio urges, "If you only have one diet left in you," you should make it your last—using his product.

A better idea is to abandon all diets—be done with dieting—forever. Adopt instead a new lifestyle—of moderation, self-control, grace and wisdom. Perhaps you do have "fat genes," or a slow metabolism or an addiction to fast food, but these factors do not create your destiny. You are not necessarily destined to be part of the 65 percent of overweight Americans in Fatland! Take control of your choices, and choose wisely. □

¹ Red Herring, "Top 10 Trends: Fat Chance, Obesity Becomes a big Problem—and Big Business," December 16, 2003 (<http://www.redherring.com>); statistics attributed to Dr. Julie Gerberding, head of the Center for Disease Control.

² Family physicians are being urged to update their office scales to high capacity models according to <http://www.aafp.org/aafp/20020101/81.html>.

³ "Supersize Patients Translate into Supersized Costs," Pensacola News Journal (<http://www.pensacolanejournal.com/news/122803/Local/ST004.shtml>).

⁴ Goliath's sales of its largest model have been increasing at a rate of 20 percent each year. (<http://biz.yahoo.com/ic/121/121835.html>).

⁵ For example, American Samoa. See http://hin.nhlbi.nih.gov/aapi_slds/download/aapislides.ppt.

⁶ A Brief History of McDonald's by William E. Mutschler (http://www.wemweb.com/chr66a/sbr66_museum/ray_kroc.html).

⁷ Actually introduced in 1971 (http://www.mcdonalds.ca/en/aboutus/marketing_themes.aspx).

⁸ Immortalized by Clara Peller in 1984 on behalf of Wendy's (http://www.tvacres.com/admascois_clarapeller.htm).

⁹ Greg Critser, Fatland: How Americans Became the Fattest People in the World (Houghton Mifflin, 2003) cited in "The Opening of the American Mouth" by Stephanie Garber (Cleveland Jewish News, February 1, 2004, <http://www.clevelandjewishnews.com/articles/2003/08/07/features/health2/bfat0808.txt>).

¹⁰ An "Extreme Big Gulp" at the 7/11 convenience markets contains 52 ounces of drink at 600 calories, assuming a non-diet soda.

¹¹ We now spend more on fast food than on higher education, personal computers and new cars. McDonald's trademarked golden arches are more widely recognized than the Christian cross! Fast Food Nation, the Darker Side of the American Meal, by Eric Schlosser (Houghton Mifflin, 2001).

¹² From <http://deadlysins.com/sins/index.htm>, January 9, 2004, where you can even order the "Seven Deadly Sins" T-shirts and coffee mugs.

¹³ Clothing manufacturers also report tremendous demand for their largest sizes. See "The Resizing of America," by Bernadette Doran (<http://www.madetomeasuremag.com/features/998059796.html>).

¹⁴ "Researcher Links Obesity, Food Portions," Associated Press, January 3, 2004.

¹⁵ Early in 2004 60 percent of the nonfiction works of the top twenty bestselling books on the USA Today's list were diet-related (<http://www.usatoday.com/life/books/leb-040121-thick.pdf>).

¹⁶ Phentermine and Fenfluramine. The manufacturer, American Home Products, settled lawsuits for about \$12 billion (op. cit. <http://www.redherring.com>).

¹⁷ "Kalahari Clue for Weight Loss," by Rory Carroll (<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/01/05/1041566310590.html>).

¹⁸ George Washington University; see "War on Fat Gets Serious," Los Angeles Times, January 3, 2004.

¹⁹ A high-density fat often thought to be associated with heart-disease.

²⁰ "Oreo Maker Threatens to Make Cookies More Healthy," by Brian O'Neill, July 6, 2003 (<http://www.postgazette.com/columnists/20030706brian101col2p2.asp>).

²¹ One hour of brisk walking (at about four miles/hour) burns approximately 300 calories (<http://www.pcanswer.com/fitness/walking1.htm>).

²² A highly-regarded pedometer is the Digi-walker (<http://www.digiwalker.com>).

²³ Surprisingly, scales with precise readouts to a tenth of a pound are hard to find. One brand with this level of accuracy is Soehnle.



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