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## The Cause of Obesity: The Data

The National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, NHANES for short, is large-scale survey performed by the CDC every few years. I've written about studies that have used the data many times. I like the survey because they use a dietary recall from the previous 24 hours instead of a food frequency questionnaire; there's still potential for errors, but most people can remember what they ate yesterday. It's also open-access data, meaning that if you have the credentials, you can use the data to answer questions. A couple of Cornell researchers did have a question: did sugar and fast-food intake cause the obesity epidemic (1)?

What they did was simple. They didn't analyze the food intake alone; they analyzed the food intake by BMI category. They found no relationship between BMI and the intake of sugar and fast food. There were two exceptions. Those who were classified as underweight drank a higher proportion of sugary sodas than the normal-weight BMI group, and those who were in the highest BMI category ate more french fries than the normal-weight group. That's about it. Did that shake your belief system?

Then researchers went to the next logical question: how many calories are we eating? They examined food availability in the 1970s when the obesity rates began to rise and in 2010 when it seemed to peak. This is tricky because a food's availability doesn't necessarily mean it's consumed. Still, it's reasonable to project a similar proportion of food waste over the decades. They found that there are more calories available—over 500 more calories per person per day—and most of the increase has been in refined carbohydrates and fats and oils. If food waste is similar, that can more than explain the rise in obesity over the past 40 years.

What this means is that it isn't fast food or sugary drinks or refined carbohydrates that cause obesity. Most people just eat too much of everything, including those types of foods. The researchers also suggest that there are other factors such as physical activity at play because not everyone is obese or overweight.

## The Bottom Line

This is something I don't say very often because I want all of us to eat better foods, especially vegetables and fruits. But when it comes strictly to attaining a normal BMI, it's simply about the calories. Diets based on fast food will not cause anyone to gain weight as long as the number of calories doesn't exceed what people should eat. It has always been and will always be about the calories.



That doesn't mean I think it a healthy way to eat; that's a different question entirely. The problem is that experts lump body weight and fast-food intake together, and they're making the wrong call based on what they think they saw. It's time for them to examine the replay in an unbiased way such as the Cornell researchers did.

This won't ever change, people: Eat less. Eat better. Move more. That's the way to a healthy and normal weight.

What are you prepared to do today?

**Dr. Chet**

**Reference:** <https://medium.com/@cornell/candy-soda-and-fast-food-are-not-driving-the-rising-obesity-trend-in-the-us-3545844f87b3>



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