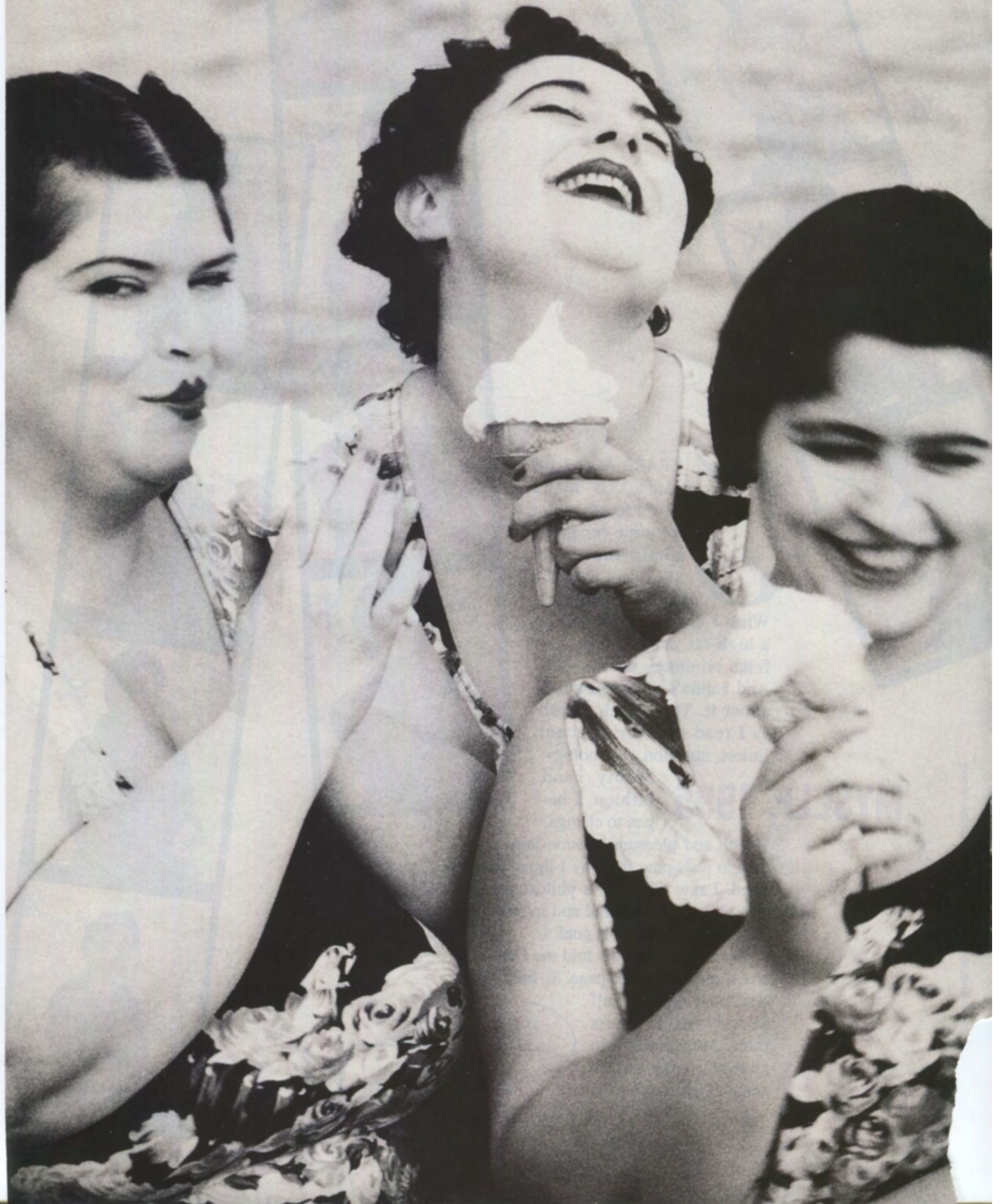


SELF HEALTH



AMERICA IS FAT!

Yes, we're talking about you out there. More Americans are obese than ever before, and it's wreaking havoc with our collective health. If you want to know what to do about it, read on.

*by John Sedgwick
photographs by Catalina*

HAVE SEEN THE FUTURE, AND IT IS VERY, VERY heavy. Two dozen of the fattest people I have ever encountered were gathered at a Boston pancake house for the annual meeting of the New England chapter of NAAFA, the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance. They were an astounding sight—so enormous that it is virtually impossible in this era of the politically correct to describe them without giving offense. They huffed audibly from the effort of merely shifting in their chairs and stood with their legs spread wide to keep their tremendous bulk securely balanced. “We have more bounce for the ounce,” said one hefty woman as she sipped a Diet Coke. “And,” she added with a doe-eyed look, “more cushion for your pushin’.”

I was there, all 170 pounds of me, to get in touch with fatness, because the land of the free and the home of the brave is also fast becoming the province of the plump. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently reported that between 1971 and 1991 the percent-

age of American adults characterized as obese—or 20 percent over their ideal body weight—increased from one quarter to one third. That's 58 million people. In an accompanying editorial, F. Xavier Pi-Sunyer, M.D., director of the Obesity Research Center at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital, called the proportion of the obese in the population “stunningly high.” When interviewed by *The New York Times*, Dr. Pi-Sunyer added, “If this were about tuberculosis, it would be called an epidemic.” The great American expansion has shocked other experts, too. “Go out to a standard suburban shopping mall, and it takes your breath away,” says Marion Nestle, Ph.D., chair of the department of nutrition at New York University. “I mean, the size of these people. It's just amazing!”

The news is not being greeted warmly by the guardians of public health. Although fat activists insist that being overweight poses no particular health hazards, epidemiologists assert that it is as bad for you as smoking. Among other perils, it sharply increases the risk of diabetes, heart disease, gallbladder disease and cancer. “There is a con-

tinuum of risk for all these ailments," says Walter Willett, M.D., a professor of epidemiology and nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health, "and the population's weight gain is pushing the whole distribution up to higher risk levels."

While these diseases may not necessarily shorten the life expectancy of the overweight individual, they are hardly desirable, and they impose a significant expense on the health care system as a whole. According to Graham A. Colditz, M.D., associate professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School,

calories," says Pi-Sunyer. A regular Fig Newton has 55 calories; the "nonfat" version has 50. Obviously, it's a mistake to think that if a snack is low in fat, it's safe to eat a ton of it, as many people do. By 1990, fat consumption had dropped to 34 percent of daily calories from 36 percent in 1978, yet the average individual's calorie consumption rose over the same period by 231 calories per day. That is enough to put on two pounds a month. Nor is there much evidence that the calories in fat are more harmful than those in carbohydrates or protein, or so the

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being overweight accounts for 5.5 percent to 6 percent of the nation's total health expenditures, or some \$36 billion in 1990.

So we have arrived at an extraordinary moment in human history, when the struggle for survival does not involve an effort to secure enough food, but to keep from ingesting too much; when the basic challenge of existence isn't to conserve energy, but to expend it. There is no shortage of explanations as to how we might have reached this paradox of plenty. Obviously, the success of modern agriculture has something to do with it, as the U.S. food production system now provides 3,700 calories per day for every American, even though the average woman requires only half of that and the average man, two thirds. To Dr. Willett, there is something almost diabolical about what he calls the "huge, powerful, well-researched food industry" constantly dreaming up new ways to entice us to overeat. He finds it especially exasperating that food purveyors have taken one of our most basic "survival senses," our ability to detect sweetness, and exploited it to sell us highly caloric, sugar-saturated junk food.

Two shifts in the demographics of the population have also added pounds. First, the beneficiaries of all this plenty, the large population of baby boomers, are getting older, a statistical trend that will inevitably inflate the country's waistline. An individual adds a pound a year throughout adulthood, which means that the numerous well-fed fortysomethings are beginning to reach for the relaxed-fit jeans. Second is an increase in poverty. The nation's weight tends to settle in the lower socioeconomic regions. In one study, women with the lowest family incomes were found to be seven times as likely to be obese as women with the highest. Thus, as the number of poor people grew in the Reagan years, so did obesity.

Ironically, the national efforts to lose weight may contribute to the problem, too. Popular diet programs like Nutri/System and Optifast are now generally recognized as having failed to produce long-term weight loss. More important to the question at hand, they may actually have led to weight gain, as dieters' bodies responded to the starvation diets by thickening back up all the more when the diet was over. Indeed, the 250-pound NAAFA member beside me was a veteran of 15 diets since childhood, packing on a little more weight each time. "The only thing I ever lost was money," she told me glumly.

By the same token, the prevalence of low-fat foods may have, perversely, upped the national calorie intake. "It's not necessarily true that if you eat low fat you will eat fewer

National Academy of Sciences acknowledged in 1989's *Diet and Health Report*. Quite likely, the low-fat mania stems from a false etymology, by which people assume that fat alone is fattening, which isn't true. (Actually, it now appears that some fats are actually beneficial, confusing as that may be to hear.) What is fattening is consuming more calories than are expended through physical

activity and general metabolic requirements.

Which brings us to the culture of ease that has grown up over the course of the century. In his book *Edge City*, Joel Garreau cites two revealing facts governing modern city planning. First, the average American will not willingly climb more than one set of stairs, thereby requiring elevators even in three-story buildings. And second, the farthest the typical American will willingly walk is 600 feet, making the automobile the basic mode of transportation even to go a couple of blocks. Such rules of thumb quickly become self-fulfilling prophecies, as elevators displace staircases in office buildings, and developers simply omit sidewalks from their plans.

Still, in the technological landscape, the one item that every

public health advocate would like to see removed is the television set. "I place much of the blame for American obesity levels squarely on television," says Dr. Nestle. TV-watching, she points out, is the activity that correlates highest with childhood obesity and with high-cholesterol levels in adults. The average American now spends about 30 hours a week in front of the tube, a state of existence that, metabolically, is virtually indistinguishable from sleep. It is also one that is most conducive to snacking.

the national calorie intake.

NEWTON HAS 55 CALORIES; THE "NONFAT" VERSION HAS 50.

Of course, there is no way to discuss fatness without a consideration of cultural ideals of beauty. It's much easier to claim you're against fat purely for health reasons. "Everybody says 'It's health, it's health, it's health,'"

says Janet Polivy, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto. "Right. Sure it is. It makes us feel very

ing pictures as a popular art form. The movies not only emphasized the body in motion, thereby requiring that the bulky clothing of the Victorian era be pared down, but they also needed actresses who were thinner-than-life to compensate for the camera lens' cruel tendency to fatten its subjects.

Since then, the feminine ideal has waxed and waned a bit—thinning for the flappers, thickening up for Marilyn Monroe, thinning down again for Twiggy—usually moving in opposition to the feast-or-famine cycles of the

national economy. But it has never before been as thin as it is now. From 1959 to 1978, the weight of the average *Playboy* centerfold model dropped from 93 percent of the average woman's to 86 percent. And the gaunt, bony figures of models like Kate Moss who grace the nation's fashion ads stand in even starker contrast to the food-aholism of the general public.

It is possible, however, that women aren't meant to be thin. As evolutionary biologists now figure it, women's bodies are designed to store up fat in order to assure that any fetuses they might be carrying would be able to survive a period of famine. "You can't be a woman without fat," says Debra Waterhouse, R.D., a nutritionist and author of *Outsmarting the Female Fat Cell*. "It is part of our internal structure and physiology."

While the male hormone testosterone creates what Waterhouse calls "fat-burning machinery," women's estrogen installs the "fat-storage machinery" on the buttocks, hips and thighs. And estrogen doesn't take kindly to efforts to slim down.

The question remains, How much fat is too much? Health experts have one standard; the culture often sets another. These days, the discrepancy between the two is enormous. Fatness has probably never been so unpopular—even though it has never before been so common. NAAFA members report constant harassment from passersby, who feel remarkably free to provide advice and commentary about the weight and eating habits of the chubby. One woman told *The New York Times* she was called "Wide Load" all through grade school. Stories like this explain why the obese, according to one study, would rather be blind or have a limb amputated than be fat. They also show why liposuction is currently the most popular form of cosmetic surgery.

Possibly, the national demonization of fat reflects a deeper personal anxiety. We are no harder on others than we are on ourselves. Nestle points out that most people nowadays are afraid that if they don't work out regularly and watch what they eat, their weight will go completely out of control. It's like the horror movie *Alien*: The beast is not out there; it is within ourselves, which makes it far more frightening.

This has led the country into a spasm of number crunching at the supermarket as we hunt for the foods that, in effect, have the least food in them. But the numbers on the back of the package have little to do with the number of calories we deposit in our stomachs. At the end (continued on page 136)

virtuous to couch the subject in health terms. Who wants to be thought of as vain and superficial?" But health issues can't explain why 70 percent of NAAFA members are female. Men may be just as heavy, but it seems that only President Clinton, with an image to protect, fusses much about his weight.

Women didn't start to fret over their figures seriously until the 1920s. (Not coincidentally, that decade also marked the first appearance of eating disorders on any large scale.) Scholars have attributed the sudden rage for thinness to everything from women's political emancipation to their taking up of sports, but the most convincing explanation comes from Anne Hollander, who points out in her book *Seeing Through Clothes* that the Twenties marked the emergence of the mov-



fat

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of the day, even the most fanatical calorie counters haven't a clue how many calories they've eaten, since calories are not detectable by any of the five senses. A typical individual's calorie consumption varies wildly from day to day.

Although the nation's attention has been focused mostly on the consumption side of this equation, virtually all the experts agree that if you really want to lose weight, the sensible thing is to increase your level of exercise. "There is no question about it," says Nestle, "and there are very few topics in nutrition about which you can say that." Walk, swim, run—these are the best ways to slim, and they may provide a bonus for women, since

Percentage of American women who are overweight

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|-----------|------|
| 1960–1962 | 25.7 |
| 1971–1974 | 26.0 |
| 1976–1980 | 26.5 |
| 1988–1991 | 34.9 |

The average weight of the American woman is 144.2 pounds.

Source: National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys, 1960–1991

recent research suggests that exercise reduces the risk of breast cancer.

The fattening of America may be an inevitable result of the triumph of consumer capitalism. In the lean times of this century, our goal was a chicken in every pot and a car in every garage. Well, we have that now and more. In giving us the pleasure of having, however, our economic system has deprived us of something possibly more valuable—the pleasure of wanting. The food industry has saturated us with its taste sensations, just as consumerism has showered us with creature comforts. But, sopped with plenty, the country has lost touch with the hunger that makes any meal a banquet and with the effort that makes any reward a joy. We have won the war against want. That's why we're losing the battle against fat. □

kill

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at the judge's discretion. In second-degree murder, for example, the sentence can go as high as 25 years to life and for first-degree manslaughter, six to 25 years.)

If the prosecutor does not believe that a continuum of abuse diminishes a woman's capacity to retreat, that she was terrified of what might happen if she allowed her abusive partner to have another chance to fulfill his threats, he is likely to see her crime as cold-blooded murder and charge her accordingly. That appears to be why White was charged with second-degree murder.

Assistant district attorney Silverman says he wondered about the applicability of the battered woman syndrome from the very outset of this case. "I concluded that even if Linda White might be a battered woman, she couldn't necessarily claim the battered woman defense," Silverman recalls. "Under New York law, a person can only use deadly force when they're faced with an imminent threat of deadly force and can't retreat in safety." Silverman believed that those crucial elements were missing on the day of White's final encounter with Strouble.

Silverman's theory of the case was that Linda White committed murder because she was a woman scorned. He believed Strouble's other girlfriend Elizabeth Cruz's contention that upon leaving the drug treatment program shortly before his death, Strouble had made clear his intention of breaking off his relationship with White and reconciling with Cruz.

Linda White finally got her day in court in June of 1990. Judge Seymour Rotker, a former assistant district attorney who had served on the bench for over a decade, presided. Commencing with jury selection, the trial took about two weeks. The panel chosen to decide White's fate was almost evenly split between males and females, blacks and whites.

Silverman avoided challenging the battered woman syndrome defense head-on. Instead, he focused on documenting the woman-scorned theory. He directed the jury's attention to the fact that White had shot Strouble in the back and that she had admittedly thrown away the murder weapon following the shooting. Finally, he suggested through various lines of questioning that the pistol might actually have belonged to someone other than

Strouble, perhaps even to White's son Alan, which would mean her attack had not been a spontaneous reaction to a threatening situation. White could not produce any witnesses who knew Strouble owned a gun.

But according to defense attorney Harding, what may have sealed White's fate was Judge Rotker's instructions to the jury. Harding had asked the judge to instruct the panel that White had no "duty to retreat" in her own home. The judge did not disagree with that contention on its merits, but refused Harding's request on the grounds that he was not obliged by law to remind the jury of that fact.

In an appeal filed later in White's case, her attorneys also objected to the way Rotker worded his instructions regarding White's plea of justifiable homicide. Rotker informed the jurors of the pertinent law as follows: "When a defendant on trial claims she was acting in self-defense, it then becomes the duty of the court to submit that defense to the jury and explain the law applicable to self-defense." The appeal claims that in his wording the judge made it sound as though he was merely fulfilling a legal obligation while at the same time personally doubting the factual basis of the self-defense claim.

Then the judge went on to explain a point of law known as the "initial aggressor" principle. "The first duty of the jury when a defense of self-defense is raised is to determine who was the initial aggressor, John Strouble or the defendant," Rotker told the panel, adding, "Generally speaking, the person who takes the offensive, when she herself is not being or about to be attacked, and strikes or attempts to strike the first wound is the initial aggressor." Harding, of course, claimed that Strouble had attacked and wounded White in an escalating pattern that made her believe he was going to kill her this time.

The judge's instructions, the appeal continues, undermined the intent of the battered woman syndrome defense and gave weight to the woman-scorned theory. Having listened to nearly two weeks of testimony, the jury took less than three hours to convict White on charges of second-degree murder and illegal weapons possession. They could have opted for two lesser charges—first-degree manslaughter or second-degree manslaughter—but did not.

When it came to deciding (continued)