

Food, Not Lack of Exercise, Fuels Obesity

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Obesity is not caused by lack of exercise, as people in wealthier nations burn more calories daily yet still gain more fat
- › Eating ultraprocessed foods is strongly linked to higher body fat because they disrupt hunger signals and make calories easier to store
- › Body fat percentage, not BMI, is the most accurate way to measure obesity and related health risks
- › Modern ultraprocessed diets and lower immune demands in industrialized countries lower resting energy needs, making fat storage more likely
- › You can restore your metabolism by removing vegetable oils, eating the right carbs for your gut health, reducing estrogen and EMF exposure, and avoiding ultraprocessed foods

Obesity has become one of the leading drivers of disease worldwide, claiming more than 4 million lives each year.¹ In the U.S. alone, rates have climbed steadily over the past century, transforming a condition once rare into one of the most pressing public health threats. Excess body fat is not just about appearance. It's tied to a cascade of serious health problems including Type 2 diabetes, heart disease, liver failure, and shortened lifespan.

Most people are told the same thing: if you want to lose weight, you need to eat less and move more. That message has dominated public health campaigns for decades, yet the crisis continues to worsen. The reason is simple — the advice is incomplete. Research

published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS) analyzed energy expenditure in 4,213 adults across 34 populations on six continents.²

The findings shattered conventional wisdom, showing that people in wealthier nations actually burn more calories each day than traditional farming or hunter-gatherer groups. Despite this, they carry significantly more body fat. The implication is undeniable: what you eat matters far more than how many calories you burn.

Industrialized diets dominated by ultraprocessed foods disrupt natural satiety signals, alter metabolism, and make it easier for your body to absorb and store calories as fat. These foods are engineered for convenience and taste, but the trade-off is metabolic dysfunction and widespread obesity. Understanding why food, not lack of exercise, fuels obesity is the first step toward reclaiming your health.

Diet Explains Obesity More Than Lack of Movement

The goal of the PNAS study was to answer a long-debated question: is obesity driven more by **eating too much** or by moving too little? This study is one of the largest to use direct measurements of daily energy expenditure among different populations, ranging from hunter-gatherer groups to highly industrialized societies.

- **Obesity was higher in industrialized populations despite higher energy burn** — The participants from wealthier nations were heavier, with greater body fat percentages and higher body mass indexes (BMIs) compared to those in less developed regions.

Surprisingly, these groups also burned more calories overall. This finding directly contradicts the popular belief that sedentary lifestyles are the main cause of weight gain. The data showed that the rise in obesity was far more connected to food intake than to physical inactivity.

- **Ultraprocessed foods were strongly linked to body fat** — For the 25 populations with available dietary data, the percentage of **ultraprocessed foods** in the diet had a strong positive relationship with body fat.

These foods, which are industrial formulations with multiple additives, were not just convenient — they altered how calories were absorbed and stored. By contrast, traditional diets in farming and foraging groups, which included more whole foods and fewer additives, were associated with leaner body composition.

- **Eating more explained most of the weight gain** — Researchers found that taking in more calories was about 10 times more important for obesity than how much energy people burned each day. Even when people in developed countries weren't gaining or losing weight during the testing period, they were still eating more overall. This showed that the type and quality of food played a bigger role in fat gain than activity levels.
- **Processed foods changed how the body handled calories** — The study noted that modern food processing makes calories easier for your body to absorb. Instead of passing some of those calories through digestion, more of them get stored as energy. On top of that, ultraprocessed foods confuse your body's hunger signals, making it easy to overeat even when you've had enough.
- **Men and women gained fat differently** — When researchers compared men and women, the patterns didn't look the same. For women, burning more energy didn't mean having less body fat. For men, those who burned more had only slightly less fat, and the effect was small. Overall, living in a wealthier, more industrialized country had a much bigger impact on fat gain than differences in daily calorie burn.

Food, Not Activity, Was the Strongest Predictor of Obesity

The take-home message of the study is clear: while daily physical activity is important for cardiovascular health, mental health, and longevity, it does not explain the **obesity epidemic**. Instead, the types of food available, especially ultraprocessed items loaded with additives and polyunsaturated fats like **linoleic acid (LA)**, drive body fat accumulation.

- **Body fat percentage told the real story** — The study showed that measuring body fat gave a clearer picture of obesity than using BMI alone. BMI often went up in developed countries because people had more muscle or bone mass, not just fat. But body fat percentage rose regardless, making it a better measure of health risks linked to obesity.
- **Lower infection rates changed energy use** — Another finding was that people in wealthier countries burned slightly fewer calories at rest. The researchers suggested this could be because their immune systems weren't working as hard. In traditional societies where parasites and infections were common, the immune system needed more energy, which raised calorie burn even without extra activity.
- **Modern diets influenced metabolism** — The researchers discussed how modern diets further lower basal metabolic rates. This could be another hidden way food drives obesity: by reducing resting energy needs while simultaneously increasing calorie absorption. Unlike in traditional diets where **fiber** and whole foods limited fat storage, modern diets shifted the balance toward energy accumulation in fat cells.

How to Take Back Control of Your Weight by Fixing the Root Cause

If you're struggling with weight gain, cravings, or fatigue, it's not because you're lazy or lacking willpower. Your body is working against you because your cells are not making energy the way they should. The research is clear: the main driver of obesity is not lack of exercise but the foods you eat and how they change your metabolism.

When your **mitochondria** — the tiny powerhouses inside your cells — are poisoned by modern food and environmental toxins, your body shifts into fat storage mode instead of energy-burning mode. The good news is you can reverse this by removing the stressors that block energy production. Here are five steps you can take to restore your metabolism and finally feel in control of your weight again:

1. Eliminate vegetable oils to reduce LA buildup — Start by cutting out vegetable oils like canola, soybean, sunflower, safflower, corn, and grapeseed. These oils are hidden in almost all restaurant meals and packaged foods. If you eat out often, this one change could be life-altering. Replace them with grass fed butter, ghee, or tallow.

Avoid chicken and pork, since they are loaded with LA, and focus on grass fed beef or lamb. Every time you swap out a vegetable-oil-heavy meal for a healthy fat source, you give your mitochondria room to breathe again.

You live in a world engineered to make you **overeate ultraprocessed foods**. These products are designed to override your natural hunger cues and push you into fat storage. If you're serious about fixing your metabolism, cook at home whenever possible, where you control the ingredients. Always read labels, even on "organic" or "healthy" foods, since many are loaded with hidden vegetable oils and additives.

2. Eat enough healthy carbs to heal your gut and fuel your cells — Carbs aren't the enemy — your body runs best on glucose, and glucose comes from carbs. The real problem is eating the wrong kinds when your gut isn't ready.

Your gut is like the command center for metabolism. If it's inflamed, it floods your body with endotoxins — harmful bacterial byproducts that choke off mitochondrial function. If you notice bloating, loose stools, or fatigue after meals, your gut is likely overproducing endotoxins.

Avoid high-fiber foods until your gut heals, because fiber feeds harmful bacteria in a damaged microbiome. In that case, stick with gentle, easy-to-digest carbs like fruit and white rice until your digestion steadies. Once things are stable, slowly reintroduce root vegetables, then legumes, and eventually whole grains.

Aim for 250 grams of **healthy carbs** a day to fuel your metabolism and thyroid. Cut ultraprocessed carbs completely, since they inflame your gut and drain energy. Over time, the right carbs help beneficial gut bacteria thrive, producing **butyrate** — a

compound that heals your gut lining, reduces inflammation, and keeps cravings in check.

- 3. Lower your exposure to estrogen and endocrine disruptors** — Excess estrogen throws your metabolism into chaos, affecting both men and women. If you're storing fat around your waist or struggling with low energy, [estrogen dominance](#) could be playing a role. Ditch plastic containers — a common source of [endocrine-disrupting chemicals](#) — stop heating food in plastic, and switch to glass or stainless steel.

Reduce exposure to receipts and toxic personal care products. If you're on estrogen replacement therapy or birth control, understand that these are powerful endocrine disruptors that add to the problem. Supporting your progesterone levels with [natural progesterone](#) helps balance estrogen and boosts your thyroid and metabolism.

- 4. Reduce electromagnetic field (EMF) exposure to protect cellular energy** — If you sleep next to your phone or keep your Wi-Fi on overnight, your mitochondria are under constant stress. [EMFs](#) raise calcium levels inside cells, slowing down energy production. To fix this, put your phone on airplane mode when you sleep — or better yet in a Faraday bag — turn off Wi-Fi at night, and keep devices out of your bedroom.

If you spend hours on Bluetooth [earbuds](#), know that they constantly beam EMFs directly into your brain. Switching to wired headphones and using wired internet when possible takes an enormous burden off your energy system.

- 5. Take back control of your food environment** — Each time you choose a whole, unprocessed food over a packaged product, you support your energy and your long-term health. Your path forward is not about starving yourself or spending endless hours at the gym.

It's about clearing out the modern toxins that poison your energy system and replacing them with foods and habits that let your body work the way it was designed. Once you do that, your metabolism begins to run smoothly again, and

weight loss becomes a natural byproduct of a body that is finally working for you, not against you.

FAQs About the Main Drivers of Obesity

Q: Is lack of exercise the main reason for obesity?

A: No. Research published in PNAS showed that people in developed nations actually burn more calories than traditional farming or hunter-gatherer groups, yet still have higher rates of obesity. The main driver is food intake and the way modern diets alter metabolism, not reduced activity.

Q: Why are ultraprocessed foods so harmful?

A: Ultraprocessed foods are designed for convenience and taste but are packed with additives, vegetable oils, and refined ingredients that disrupt hunger cues and make calories easier to absorb. This leads to overeating and pushes your body to store fat instead of burning it efficiently.

Q: What is more accurate, BMI or body fat percentage?

A: The study found that body fat percentage is a far better indicator of obesity than BMI. BMI often rises due to more muscle or bone mass, but body fat percentage reflects true fat gain and health risks.

Q: How do modern environments affect metabolism?

A: People in wealthier countries burned slightly fewer calories at rest because their immune systems weren't working as hard. Lower infection rates, combined with ultraprocessed diets, shifted the body's energy balance toward fat storage.

Q: What steps can I take to restore my metabolism?

A: You can fix the root causes by eliminating vegetable oils, eating enough healthy carbs to support gut health, reducing exposure to estrogen-like chemicals, limiting EMF exposure, and taking back control of your food environment. These steps allow your cells to produce energy efficiently again, making weight loss a natural outcome of restored health.

Sources and References

- ^{1, 2} [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences July 14, 2025](#)