

Investigating the Time Use Patterns of Obese Americans

Obesity is the most common food and nutrition-related health problem in the United States—a complex problem with no single cause or solution. Food choices, physical activity levels, metabolism, and genetics are among the many factors that can influence a person’s weight. How a person allocates his or her time each day may also have an impact. ERS researchers used data from the Eating & Health Module of the American Time Use Survey to analyze associations between time spent on various activities and body mass index (BMI—a measure of weight adjusted for height). Although these analyses are associations only and do not necessarily indicate causality, they provide insight into differences in behavior among people of different weight categories.

Survey data on the time spent by Americans age 20 and older on 24 major

activity categories reveal that the biggest differences between normal-weight people and obese people were in time spent watching television, participating in sports and exercise, and engaging in paid work. Those who were normal weight spent about 2.45 hours watching TV on an average day during 2006-08, those who were overweight spent 2.7 hours, and those who were obese spent 3.1 hours. Normal-weight individuals spent 18 minutes per day engaged in sports and exercise, whereas those who were obese spent 12 minutes per day on average.

Normal-weight individuals spent an average of 3.6 hours engaged in paid work per day during 2006-08. While this duration may seem short, it reflects an average calculated for the full 7-day week (that often includes 2 nonwork days) using survey responses from individuals who are

employed as well as those not employed. Overweight individuals spent an average of 3.9 hours per day on paid work, and obese individuals spent 3.7 hours. Because overweight and obese individuals spend more time in paid work than normal-weight individuals, policies and programs to combat obesity may need to consider that those individuals have less free time available for weight-reducing efforts.

Data on time spent eating and drinking show mixed results. Normal-weight people spent 6 minutes more in primary eating and drinking than obese individuals and 7 minutes more in secondary eating, but they spent 4 minutes less in secondary drinking. Survey respondents identified primary eating and drinking as the main activity, while secondary eating and drinking occurred when they were doing something else, such as watching television, engaging in paid work, or getting dressed for the day.

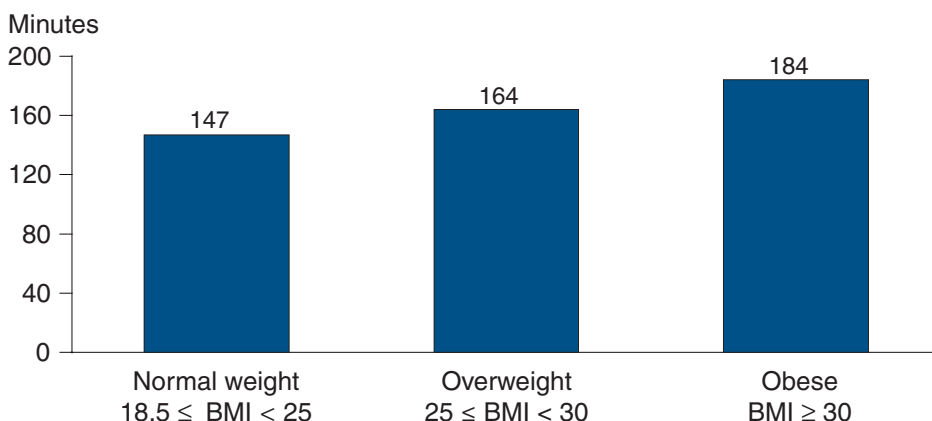
Further investigation found that it is not the absolute amount of time spent eating and drinking that is associated with BMI but the relative time spent in primary and secondary eating. Normal-weight and overweight individuals spent relatively more time in primary eating and drinking than in secondary, whereas obese individuals spent relatively more time in secondary eating and drinking.

Karen S. Hamrick,
khamrick@ers.usda.gov

This finding is drawn from . . .

How Much Time Do Americans Spend on Food?
 by Karen S. Hamrick, Margaret Andrews, Joanne Guthrie, David Hopkins, and Ket McClelland, EIB-86, USDA, Economic Research Service, November 2011, available at: www.ers.usda.gov/publications/eib86/

Obese Americans watched 37 minutes more television on an average day in 2006-08 than normal-weight Americans



BMI = Body Mass Index.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from 2006-08 Bureau of Labor Statistics American Time Use Survey and ERS Eating & Health Module data.