

## Adult Obesity in the US: Obesity Problems Affecting the African American Community

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### Abstract

This Paper addresses the epidemic of Obesity in the African American population. It examines several factors that contribute to the relative high incidence of the disease in both males and females. Historical, cultural, socio-economic factors are primarily considered. Health impacts are considered in terms of co morbidity of obesity and other serious life threatening diseases.

**Keywords:** Obesity; African american; Historical cultural social; Economic; Diet; Lifestyle

### Introduction

Food happens to be one enjoyable aspect in every culture. It brings people together and closer than ever, but it can also cause major issues within one's own body, sense of self and a person's status within their community if not kept in moderation. Poor diets among individuals can cause one to become overweight or even obese which can have detrimental effects on the body of the individual. Obesity happens when people consume more calories than the body burns. Then the excess calories are stored as fat in different parts of the body [1]. A calorie is a unit of energy in the food one eats, and the human body needs this energy to function and be active, although, if one takes in more energy than is needed, they then gain more weight [2]. In fact, obesity happens to be significant health threat among all Americans.

There are several ways to measure if one is obese or not. One way this is measured is by collecting one's Body Mass Index (BMI) which shows the relationship between height and weight of an individual [3]. In fact people with a BMI of thirty or more are considered to be obese [2]. Along with this, all individuals that are eighteen and older who happen to have a BMI of twenty-five or more are at risk for early death and disability from being overweight or obese [3]. One other way to measure for obesity is by measuring one's waist to hip ratio and waist circumference [1].

In fact, adult obesity rates in the US have doubled in the last thirty years (chronic diseases). According to the American Physiological Society more than sixty-four % of US adult population is considered to be overweight and roughly thirty % of Americans meet the criteria for obesity. Along with this, the Nutrition Information Resource Center stated in their adult obesity facts sheet that currently fifty-five % of adults in the US happen to meet the National Institutes of Health classification of being overweight or obese. Also, over sixty % of U.S. adult women are considered to be overweight with just over one-third being obese [2].

As of today, according to the CDC Office of Vital Health Statistics sixty % of African American males are overweight and seventy-eight % of African American females lead the population in obesity [4]. With this being known, African American women happen to have the highest rates of being overweight or obese compared to other groups within the US, and about four out of five African American women are overweight or obese [3]. There are many reasons as to why the African American community has the highest rates of obesity among all other populations in the US.

The Slave era contributed to the African American current diet.

During the slave era many slaves ate with spare food from their slave owners. Usually slave owners spare food included: meat, pork feet, chicken, pig intestine, black eye peas, and etc. The average location of meat (usually in the form of pork) was three or four pounds a week per slave Deetz.'

The type of food the Africans were introduced to during slavery still remain in their diet today. Most of the spare food slaves ate was high in calories, fat, and sodium. Many of the meats they ate are being associated with cancer and diseases today. Slave's diets progressed into a diet that was not of their homeland. According to Africa's available source of food wheat, barley, yams, and legumes were staples of the diets. Meat was rarely eaten only on special occasions because the cost of meat was high.

In Africa today being heavier set is more accepted because it symbolizes wealth and beauty. Africa has an extremely high population in poverty with a high amount of the population having malnutrition deprivation, AIDS, tuberculosis, and all diseases that cause an individual to be extremely low in weight. The *Encyclopedia of Food and Culture* provides an explanation on how a culture's history affects their behavior with food. Studies of food as part of a cultural system should consider dietary behavior, the environmental conditions in which foods are grown, the meanings associated with food, the social structure and material culture affecting food, and the historical factors that contribute to the persistence or change in food behavior. The history of the African American community is different from most minorities who came by choice, African Americans searching for the African roots of their culture should begin by understanding that only about five % of between 11 and 12 million enslaved Africans were brought to North America or to the United States. Approximately 95% of the people exported from Africa were sold to "tropical America. An African American as we all know was forced over to America and the lifestyle consisted of very little to eat or what the slave owner gave slaves. The progression of African American obesity issues start with

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their history. Africans by force arrived in America with an identity but soon faded as a result of slavery and today African American haunted by the legacy of slavery try to find a way to create their own identity.

All ethnicities have some kind of tradition or custom that food is an essential element. No matter the race all people celebrate some sort of accomplishment that involved family members and them gathering together enjoying a meal. Food became an outlet for African Americans from the despairs of slavery according to *Southern Food: At Home, on the Road, in History* [5]. For slaves the kitchen was one of the few places where their imagination and skill could have free rein and full expression, and there they often excelled, one of the few places where either blacks or women could let their guard down and be themselves. Almost everywhere else, they had to conform to binding roles that stifled expression and killed creativity; but in the kitchen, they could be extravagant, artistic, whimsical, assertive, and even sensuous. Herein, may lay the ultimate explanation for the natural superiority of Southern food [5].

Food gave slaves some sort of gratification and sense of hope. This gratification still is an essential characteristic of African American culture today. Food is served at all African Americans celebrations, barbecues, wedding and funerals, etc. Food was not just a way to survive for African Americans it was often associated with fun, unity, hope, and love. According to *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* "Even for the blacks who migrated from the South these people retained its important cultural influence as ties continued with family members "back home," through holiday visits, attendance at church revivals and homecomings, and shared network functioning such as child and parental care. Migrants returned to get some of that "old down home cooking" [6]. Only With time did African American's diet, carried generation to generation, and unfortunately caused unhealthy factors.

Socioeconomic plays an important role in the health status of an individual. A majority of African American statistically are far from the top of the chart when it comes to socioeconomic factors. *Center of Control Diseases Health disparities experienced by Black or African Americans—US* explains how socioeconomic status is associated with health status. [7]

Lower socioeconomic status often results in inadequate housing; poor nutrition; bad social environments, and working conditions; poor access to or limited contact with the health care system; and fewer social amenities that directly or indirectly affect health. The impact of lower socioeconomic status on morbidity and mortality is especially pronounced among African Americans.

Those who are on the lower end of socioeconomic spectrum may struggle with paying bills and spending extra time or money on a healthy diet. Food that is unhealthy is usually faster to make and less expensive. According to *WEBMD Healthier Eating Cost More*, healthier food is more expensive. People who spent the least amount on their food, an average of \$6.77 a day, were also the furthest from hitting the government's daily guidelines of 3,500 milligrams of potassium, 25 g of daily fiber, 10 micrograms of vitamin D, and 1,000 milligrams of calcium. On average, they were getting around 2,391 milligrams of potassium, 16 grams of fiber, 5 micrograms of vitamin D, and 854 milligrams of calcium. They were also the group that most overshot the suggested limits of 10% of daily calories from added sugar and 7% of daily calories from saturated fat, consuming around 14% of calories from sugar and 12% of calories from saturated fat. The highest spenders, on the other hand, who had food costs that were nearly twice

as high as those who spent the least, came the closest to hitting the government's targets, though they were still short on nutrients and a bit higher than the targets for sugar and saturated fat [8].

African American communities should be more educated on inexpensive healthier food. It is suggested that community organizers, celebrities' campaign, social service public health agencies etc. keep making an effort to put the message out there for people to be more aware of the health cost of cheaper food. For an African American to already consume unhealthy food as being part of the culture and then add in unhealthy junk food and fast food only increases obesity rates. In communities where the population of African American is high there is a high amount of gas stations, mini marts, liquor stores, chicken restaurants, and etc. In communities like Englewood Chicago, Maywood Illinois, and North Lawndale Chicago there needs to be an improvement in access to healthy food markets. According to an article *what is it?*

This pattern is clear in many urban areas. In Washington, DC, for example, the city's lowest-income and almost exclusively African American wards (Wards 7 and 8) have one supermarket for every 70,000 inhabitants, while two of the three highest-income and predominantly white wards (Wards 2 and 3) have one for every 11,881 residents. One in five of the city's food stamp recipients live in a neighborhood without a grocery store. (Anonymous)

It is not a shock that African Americans are high in obesity there is not a fair amount of access to healthy food in communities where African Americans are high in population. Some individual may travel by bus or have a limited amount of gas money and traveling to go the further distance to a supermarket does not seem worth it. The places that we live in play a huge role in how we eat, it influences our decisions pertaining to our diet and proper exercise. Exercise plays a part in health status also and if fitness centers (private or public) are not available how can someone expect an individual to work out. In some circumstance a neighborhood may be too unsafe to exercise outside. For some who live in communities where there are no local gyms imagine the struggle of working than traveling to an even further fitness center, while raising a family? This is just a few examples of how the environment can interact with people's diet.

Today with the advancement of technology eating is not valued the same as it was in the past. People often don't eat at the dinner table today and most are in too much of a rush to put their time in a healthy meal. There has been much effort into lowering obesity in the world. The rate of obesity varies in Unites States according to *the Food Research Action Center National* data show that 82.1% of Black women and 75.7% of Hispanic women are overweight or obese compared to 59.5% of White women [9]. In addition, over half of Black women are obese (versus 38.8 % of Black men and 32.2 % of White women) [9]. Extreme obesity continues to be higher among women (8.1%) than men (4.4%), especially among Black women who have more than double the rates of extreme obesity as White and Hispanic women (17.8% versus 7.1 % and 6.0% ) [9].

As shown above African Americans are suffering most from obesity which only contributes to other health conditions. Obesity in African American community cannot just be solved with a fitness center or change of diet, there are several other factors that contribute. The factors that I believe should be more looked at as I discuss above history, socioeconomic, culture, and environment. In order for African Americans establish an identity that does not consist of such an unhealthy diet they must change their entire

way of thinking, because the mindset of an individual usually predicts their actions. According to the late Amos N. Wilson (2011), "A drastic reorganization of priorities and re-examination of values: development Afro centric cultural, political, economic programs and Afro centric ethical renewal.

Another reason is views that are portrayed within the culture of these people. For instance, excessive weight among African Americans is characterized as being the breadwinner and having the capacity to afford foods that are considered to be luxurious such as meats and fried foods [10]. Along with this, there is a notion within the African American community that "bigger is better," therefore making African Americans more comfortable with higher Body Mass Indexes and creating a less eager initiative to take the necessary steps to curb ones weight problems. Other reasons for obesity could be the neighborhoods that encompass the African American community. It is found that within the black communities of America, there are more fast food places compared to white communities. Along with this, there less super markets within the black community compared to white communities, and the supermarkets that are within the black community have less options to eat healthy compared to white communities [1].

Food deserts are defined as urban neighborhoods and rural towns without ready access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food. Instead of supermarkets and grocery stores, these communities may have no food access or are served only by fast food restaurants and convenience stores that offer few healthy, affordable food options. The lack of access contributes to a poor diet and can lead to higher levels of obesity and other diet-related diseases, such as diabetes and heart disease.

USDA was at the forefront of identifying food deserts and working to eliminate them when the Department created its High Priority Performance Goals. USDA's Economic Research Service estimates that 23.5 million people live in food deserts. More than half of those people (13.5 million) are low-income. A one-mile marker may not be appropriate to use in rural areas where the population is more sparsely distributed and where vehicle ownership is high. To further refine the number of people who may be affected by food deserts, a 10-mile marker is used to consider food access in rural areas. 2.3 million People live in low-income rural areas that are more than 10 miles from a supermarket.

Also, unhealthier foods tend to cost less than healthy choices. This is important in the sense that many African Americans live in poverty in the US. Even high income African Americans tend to live in neighborhoods that are thirty percentage poorer than white Americans on the same economic level. This also goes back to what is offered in the African American communities as choices they have when it comes to eating. Along with not being able to access and afford healthy foods, poverty causes a less surplus of food and therefore leads to a preoccupation with food which in turn results in binge eating. Binge eating was observed mostly with the food stamp programs. These families who receive food stamps tend to binge eat early in the month and towards the end, when they run out of stamps, they become preoccupied with food [1]. In fact, about one in three food stamp households are headed by an African American and more than one-third of food stamp benefits are issued to African Americans (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2007). Along with this, African American women have the highest rates of food stamp usage and the highest rates of obesity [11]. Overall, more than eighty-five percentage of African Americans will use food stamps at some point in their lives [12]. Studies have also shown that African Americans tend to eat unhealthier foods than other races due to culture, not just placement in society or cost

of food. What is meant by this is that due to the cultures diet which consists of mostly "Soul food," they are more obese than other races [1]. According to Makeisha Lee, the soul food diet consists of high fat contents, sugar, and sodium for flavor, and continuous consumption of these foods without adequate exercise can cause the body's nutritional system to get clogged up, confused, and stuck in fat storing mode. According to Dr. Ediri Brume [1], this traditional African American diet is high in saturated fats (aka bad fat) and salt. All in all, eating unhealthy, no matter the reason behind it, is abundant in the African American communities in the United States, hence the reason African Americans tend to be more obese compared to other Americans.

Thus, obesity is a major issue because it causes serious risks to the human body. First of all, about 300,000 deaths each year may be attributed to lifestyle factors which involve poor diet and exercise [13], and it is estimated that forty percentage of African Americans overall suffered more deaths a year compared to Caucasians [14]. In fact with the US holding such high numbers of obese patrons, it is now the second most preventable cause of death next smoking [1]. Secondly, being overweight or obese increases one's likelihood to develop certain health problems such as type two diabetes, coronary heart disease and stroke, metabolic syndrome, certain types of cancer, sleep apnea, osteoarthritis, gallbladder disease, fatty liver disease, and pregnancy complications [15]. Among these risks, three of them are the top three leading causes of death in the US as of 2007. The three risks are heart disease, cancer, and stroke [7].

First, about eighty-five percentage of people with type-II diabetes are overweight [15], and of the individuals diagnosed with type-II diabetes about eighty to ninety percentage are also diagnosed as obese with about fifteen percentage of type two diabetics being African American [14]. When it comes to heart disease and strokes, people who are obese are more likely to develop high blood pressure, high levels of triglycerides and LDL cholesterol (bad cholesterol) and low levels of HDL cholesterol (good cholesterol). All of these are risks for heart disease and stroke. Along with this, excess body fat, especially around the abdomen, may produce chemicals that can cause inflammation in blood vessels and throughout the body raising the risk for heart disease and stroke [15]. In fact, death due to heart disease and stroke are almost twice that rate for African Americans compared to Caucasians [16], and is the first and third leading cause of death in the US [7]. Cancer is another risk factor that happens to be a leading cause of death in the United States. With this disease being the second leading cause of death within the US [7], and obesity rates being so high in the US, one could see the link between the two. Being overweight or obese can increase the chances of developing certain types of cancer such as cancers of the colon, esophagus, and kidneys, as well as, postmenopausal breast cancer and uterine cancer in women [15].

Risks for metabolic syndrome not only increases from being obese, but it also increases the likelihood of contracting type two diabetes and heart disease, and it is estimated that twenty-seven percentage of American adults have metabolic syndrome. Sleep apnea is when a person stops breathing during the night, and this disease can be attributed to obesity because excess fat stored in the neck can cause the airway to become smaller or can cause inflammation in the neck. Osteoarthritis is caused by the extra pressure on the joints due to carrying too much weight, and gallbladder disease is more apprehensible due to the fact that obese individuals tend to produce more cholesterol increasing their chances of producing gallstones. Fatty liver disease occurs when fat builds up in the liver causing inflammation or injury. This disease increases when someone is diabetic, and since people who are obese

are more likely to be diabetic, their risk for this disease increases as well. Along with this, since there are such higher rates among African Americans with type-II diabetes, their risk for contracting fatty liver disease increases as well. Finally, individuals who are overweight can go through problems during their pregnancies because women who are overweight or obese during pregnancy are more likely to develop insulin resistance (gestational diabetes), high blood pressure (pre-eclampsia), and high blood sugar [15]. Along with these risks, recent studies have shown that obesity is also related to an increase in depression, social isolation, and anxiety [10].

All these risks not only attribute to the high morbidity and mortality rates among African Americans, but it also threatens the survivals of healthy families within the community. With this in mind, African American communities need to be educated on how to improve their health. One major thing that can help provide this change within the community is to have the people within the community increase their physical activity levels, and decrease their caloric intake levels [17]. This is truly needed especially since in 2007 statistics show that African Americans were fifty percentage less likely to engage in physical activity compared to Caucasians [16]. Eating healthier and gaining the adequate amount of exercise may be difficult for these individuals and this is why it is a national obligation to make these actions more obtainable within the African American community. Make healthier foods easier to afford and find. Create more supermarkets and less fast food restaurants within the African American communities. Most of all, teach each generation, one at a time, how to stay healthy. [18-24]

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the intersection of diet and lifestyle where lifestyle encompasses distal, medial, and proximal determinants. The term "anthropogens" or "man-made environments, thereby products and or life styles encouraged by these, some of which may be detrimental to human health. Provides a possible focus for chronic diseases to what the germ theory afforded infectious diseases, a possibly metaflammatory explanation. This suggests a broader view of lifestyle and focus on determinants, rather than obesity and lifestyle per se as the specific causes of modern chronic disease. Under such an analysis, obesity is seen more as a "canary in a mine shaft" signaling problems in the broader environment, suggesting that population obesity management should be focused more upstream.

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