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Public's Perceptions at Odds with CDC Observations on Obesity



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Washington, DC – Despite the increasing prevalence of obesity, Americans are less likely to describe themselves as overweight now than they were five years ago, according to a new poll conducted by Ipsos Public Affairs. Today, 30% of U.S. adults aged 18 and older view themselves as overweight, down from 36% in 2004, suggesting that Americans' perception of what constitutes a healthy weight is changing.

The Center for Disease Control, which defines obesity as having a body mass index (BMI) of 30 or greater, has been tracking obesity rates in the United States for over 20 years. According to this data, the prevalence of obesity among adults in the U.S. has increased from 23% in 2004 to 27% in 2008. Furthermore, in both 2004 and 2008 an additional 37% of adults were considered to be just overweight, defined as having a BMI of 25 – 29.9.

According to these CDC statistics, 63% of adults are either overweight or obese, which is more than double the proportion of those who consider themselves to be overweight (30%).

More precisely, 15% of adults surveyed by Ipsos say they are “slightly” overweight, 11% say they are “somewhat” overweight, and 4% say they are “very” overweight. Rather, two thirds (67%) say that they are currently at a healthy weight. Very few (3%) consider themselves to be underweight.

- The gap is particularly striking among African-Americans: While the CDC reports that 71% of African-Americans are overweight or obese, only 24% of those polled consider themselves overweight.

Though 30% of adults admit to being overweight, just 14% of all adults polled say they are currently on a diet to try to lose weight.

These are some of the findings of an Ipsos poll conducted July 30 – August 3, 2009. For the survey, a nationally representative, randomly selected sample of 1,000 adults aged 18 and older across the United States was interviewed by Ipsos. With a sample of this size, the results are considered accurate within 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20, of what they would have been had the entire adult population in the U.S. been polled. All sample surveys and polls may be subject to other sources of error, including, but not limited to coverage error, and measurement error. These data were weighted to ensure that the sample's composition reflects that of the actual U.S. population according to U.S. Census figures. Respondents had the option to be interviewed in English or Spanish.

Despite the reported increase in obesity by the CDC, only half of those surveyed (51%) feel that being overweight or obese is a health problem for them and their families (17% major problem; 33% minor problem). In contrast, 49% say that being overweight or obese is no problem at all, an *increase* of 5 points since 2004.

Who's to Blame?

More Americans place the responsibility for being overweight or obese on the individuals themselves (62%) than do on other factors such as spouses, parents and other family members (13%); fast food restaurants (8%); food and snack manufacturers (6%); the government (3%); or beverage manufacturers (3%).

However, Americans are less inclined to blame individuals themselves than they were five years ago; in 2004, 77% said the responsibility fell on the shoulders of the individual.

- While men are more likely than are women to blame individuals themselves (67% vs. 57%), women are more likely than are men to say that family members are most at fault (17% vs. 9%).
- Fewer than half of those with a household income of less than \$25,000 (46%), those who are not employed (49%), and African-Americans (41%) hold individuals themselves accountable for being overweight or obese.

Eating Habits Seen as Most Likely Cause and Most Effective Solution

Americans are fairly divided when it comes to the causes of obesity; nearly as many blame having a sedentary lifestyle and lack of exercise (36%) as having a poor diet and eating habits (41%). Just 7% feel that heredity and genes are most likely to cause obesity while 15% say that it is a combination of all of these factors.

When it comes to combating obesity in the U.S., Americans by far feel that it would be most effective to educate people about the importance of exercise and a healthy diet (75%). Just one in six (16%) feel it would be more effective to impose government regulations to ensure that food manufacturers produce healthy products. Six percent volunteer that both of these methods should be used and 3% are unsure.

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