

MEDICAL STUDIES WEIGH IN

Americans still bulky but making no gains

By Marissa Cevallos
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Americans are fat, but at least they're not getting fatter.

Sixty-eight percent of Americans are overweight or obese, but that number hasn't changed much in the last decade, according to a team of doctors Wednesday in two studies in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

Doctors feared that the trend of ever-increasing rates of obesity that started in the 1980s had no end.

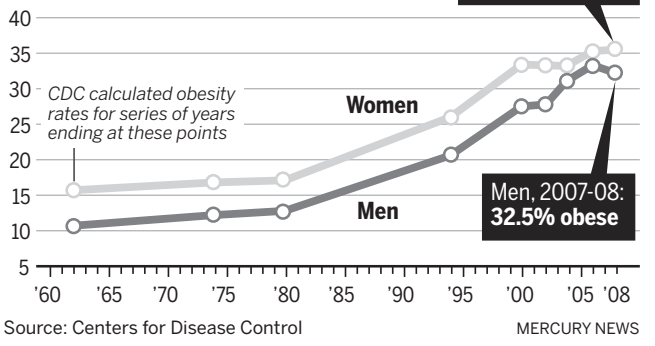
But the new findings reveal that from 1999 to 2008, the percent of obese women hovered between 33.2 and 35.5 percent, and the percent of obese men ranged between 27.5 percent to 32.2 percent – small changes for the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey which measures the Body Mass Index (BMI) for over five thousand men and women every two years.

Still, doctors are hesitant to give high-fives and pop champagne.

"It's really good news if this is a real change," said Thomas Robinson, a professor of pediatrics and the director for the Center for Healthy Weight at Stanford University and Lucile Pack-

Obesity rates

The nation's obesity rate remains high, with 33.9 percent of all adults considered obese, but it appears to have leveled off.



ard Children's Hospital. "But we're still stuck with a large percent of the population that is obese."

For years, health professionals have been warning that obesity — and the diseases like diabetes it engenders — are all poised to become public health problems as deadly and costly as cigarette smoking.

Robinson tersely warns that if obesity trends don't take a dramatic reversal, "we're going to have a disaster."

Also found in one of the studies: Childhood obesity may be slowing too, with one exception—the heaviest boys are getting heavier.

Fifteen percent of all boys

between 6 to 19 now fit into the 97th percentile weight category, a group beyond obesity that researchers gingerly term "highest BMI." Though Latino boys and African-American boys are more likely to be in this highest obesity class than white boys (19.6 percent and 15.7 percent in 2008, respectively), the only significant upward trend toward high BMI was seen in white boys.

Childhood obesity is alarming, says Robinson, because it strongly predicts obesity into adulthood, when chronic diseases are more likely.

Overall, for children 2 to 19, 31.7 percent were overweight (above the 85 percentile), 16.9 were obese (above

the 95th percentile) and 11.9 were above the 97th percentile.

Does the improved data mean Americans are absorbing public health messages about eating healthy and exercising regularly?

"We don't know," said Cynthia Ogden, a CDC epidemiologist and author in both studies.

More public awareness is one explanation for the apparent slowdown, say doctors. But maybe American obesity has reached a saturation point based on genetics and the environment, suggests Robinson.

In Santa Clara County, obesity levels also appeared to plateau, hovering around 18 percent for adults between 2004 and 2009, according to county health spokeswoman Joy Alexiou.

"We think more schools and parents are emphasizing better eating habits and exercise," said Alexiou. "We've raised a lot of attention to this issue." Vending machines have healthier snacks not only in schools, she says, but also in the workplace.

Nearly two-thirds of Santa Clara County schools participate in Fit for Learning, a nutrition and wellness program that teaches kindergarten through sixth-grade students about the food pyramid, exercise and making healthy food choices. In the past four years, Michelle Mount, the program's coordinator, says she's seen a steady increase in students and staff talking about fitness. And she noted that scores on the Fitnessgram, a physical test that includes a mile run, have improved recently in some dis-

tricts.

"There have been some gains, but we have a lot more work to do," said Mount. "As a society, we've become very sedentary. Students sit in the classroom all day."

Fighting obesity, says Mount, "is like trying to turn around a large ship."

Still, a few San Jose residents say the message must be getting through.

"My high school son doesn't drink soda," said Matthew Fleming, a business owner on his way out of the San Jose Athletic Club after a lunchtime basketball game. He said he's seen public schools emphasize health and fitness more over the last 10 years.

"People are more aware that to live a longer life, you've got to be healthy," said Fleming.

Six from Lynbrook in Intel semifinals

By Sharon Noguchi
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Fifteen Bay Area students, including six from Lynbrook High School in San Jose, were named Wednesday as semifinalists in the prestigious Intel Science Talent Search contest.

The six Lynbrook students were the most from one California school, tying a record set last year by The Harker School in San Jose. Harker this year had four semifinalists. Only five other schools, in the East and South, produced more semifinalists this year.

The winners were pre-

sented Wednesday with over-size \$1,000 scholarship checks at their schools. The schools also won \$1,000 for each winner.

The contest drew 1,736 entries from seniors at 175 high schools across the country. Of the 300 semifinalists, 28 were from California, which each year has been placing more students in the nation's oldest science competition. California had 25 semifinalists last year and 23 in each of the three previous years.

The Bay Area semifinalists and their schools are:

The Harker School: Nam-

rata Anand, Vishesh Jain, Andrew Zhou, Kevin Zhang.

Mission San Jose High School: David Xu, Zhejun Zhou.

Lynbrook High School: Tony Ho, Ritik Malhotra, Tejas Navaratna, David Liu, Akshay Maheshwari, Raman Nelakanti.

Palo Alto High School: Lynnelle Lin Ye.

Foothill High School, Pleasanton: Abhiraj Chowdhury and Druthi Ghanta.

Forty finalists will be named Jan. 27 and will win an expense-paid trip to Washington, D.C., for the final competition.

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What a Pain in the Neck! Jan. 19

Neck pain may just be troublesome — or it could signal more serious disease or injury. Learn about medical and surgical management of neck pain and your options for treatment by neurosurgeons and orthopedic surgeons.

David Yeh MD is a spine surgery Fellowship-trained neurosurgeon.

Stroke Mimics: Migraine, TIA, Bell's Palsy Jan. 26

Many conditions can mimic stroke symptoms — and treatment options are expanding every day. Hear the latest techniques for dealing with common neurological disorders that can be confused with a stroke.

Raul Guisado MD, neurologist, is Medical Director of Regional's Advanced Primary Stroke Center.

How Tiny Coils Deliver Huge Outcomes Feb. 2

Delicate coils as fine as a human hair make it possible to remove stroke-causing clots in the farthest reaches of the brain. Learn how extremely delicate technology is rescuing stroke and other neuro patients from death and disability.

Arash Padidar MD is a Board-certified neuro-interventional radiologist.

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