

Hefty impact of poor eating habits

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Too much fast food, poor meal choices and bad eating habits are causing more Canadians to be overweight or obese. Despite this trend, individuals who eat well are 20 per cent less likely to be obese, according to a study by Concordia University economists published in the *Journal of Primary Care & Community Health*.

"The risk of being obese or overweight is directly related to bad eating habits such as skipping meals, eating away from home, high consumption of fast and processed foods, as well as low consumption of fruit and vegetables," says first author Sunday Azagba, a PhD candidate in the Concordia Department of Economics. "In Canada, food purchased from restaurants accounts for more than 30 per cent of the average weekly food expenditure per household."

As part of their study, the researchers examined data from the Canadian National Population Health Survey to evaluate how [eating habits](#) could impact obesity trends among adults aged 18 to 65. The World Health Organization, which uses the body mass index (BMI) to measure weight-for-height, estimates that a BMI greater than or equal to 25 makes for an overweight person and a BMI greater than or equal to 30 equals obesity.

"More than 25 per cent of [Canadians](#) aged 31 to 50 exceed the safe limit of total calories derived from fats," adds co-author Mesbah Sharaf, a PhD candidate in the Concordia Department of Economics, noting advances in food engineering by producers may have contributed to the difficulty of resisting food craving and increase obesity rates.

Measures to encourage healthier eating

Higher taxes on fatty foods might encourage healthier eating, the economists suggest, yet higher prices won't sway everyone to choose a better diet. "Some people are unresponsive to taxes and such added costs to [fast food](#) would reduce their spending power without altering their eating behavior," says Azagba, noting an alternative would be for governments to subsidize less calorie-dense foods such as fruit and vegetables. "This might induce more people to substitute healthy foods for unhealthy ones."

Other measures to encourage healthier eating could entail subsidizing healthy meal plans at schools and universities, restricting junk food in educational institutions and improving physical education programs in schools. "Education programs that raise awareness of the benefits of physical activity and the health implications of food choices, as well as compulsory warning labels about the health risks on [food](#) packaging, similar to those on cigarette packages, may also help to mitigate obesity rates," says Sharaf.

It's imperative that obesity rates across Canada decline, says Azagba: "Health-care costs for caring for obese individuals are estimated to be 42 per cent greater than for people with normal weight. Research has found excessive body weight to be a risk factor for many chronic disease, such as cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, liver diseases, as well as prostate, breast and colon cancer."

Excessive body weight is an epidemic with repercussions beyond Canada. The World Health Organization estimates that 1 billion adults are [overweight](#) and that obesity accounts for more than 2.6 million deaths each year. The European Union estimates the combined direct and indirect costs of obesity to be €33 billion a year, whereas in the United States the total cost of obesity is estimated to be \$139 billion

annually.

More information: [jpc.sagepub.com/content/early/ ... /19/2150131911417445](http://jpc.sagepub.com/content/early/19/2150131911417445)

Provided by Concordia University

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