

Obesity threatens US military readiness

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Obesity is recognized as a public health crisis with serious medical and economic effects, but a Perspective in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, published by Elsevier, outlines how obesity's consequences also impact the US military.

"This is a complex problem that has a deep impact on national security by limiting the number of available recruits, decreasing re-enlistment candidacy, and potentially reducing mission readiness," states corresponding author Sara Police, Ph.D., Department of Pharmacology and Nutritional Sciences, University of Kentucky College of Medicine, Lexington, KY, U.S. " Additional, relevant issues include the changing demographics of the [military](#) and food insecurity among military families."

The connection between the nation's health and national security was identified in 1946 when the National School Lunch Program was passed to address malnutrition among World War II military recruits. This was at a time when limited calories per day were available in the US food supply. Today, the concern for malnutrition is no longer as pressing. Instead, dramatic calorie enrichments to the food supply and increased portion sizes, among several other factors, have promoted weight gain and consequently reduced the number of otherwise eligible men and women for enlistment. The percentage of eligible recruits who exceed the military's percent body fat standards has doubled for men and tripled for women since 1960.

These statistics have prompted military leaders to call for changes in nutritional and dietary patterns, including initiatives in schools to remove less healthful food options and increase the use of free and reduced cost lunch programs. Another solution could be nutrition education within the armed services themselves.

"Drill sergeants are essential and important leaders in the armed forces for coaching, counseling, mentoring, and training new soldiers," explains Dr. Police. "This Perspective draws on previous studies illustrating that accurate nutrition information and behavior modeling could strongly influence recruits."

Co-author Nicole Ruppert, MS, Department of Pharmacology and Nutritional Sciences, University of Kentucky College of Medicine, notes, "Other leaders, including commanding officers and non-commissioned officers, also play essential roles in information dissemination and behavior modeling and could have a continued impact on soldiers beyond basic training."

The changing demographics of today's basic training regiments include a greater percentage of women and racial/ethnic groups. These are groups of the population who experience a higher rate of obesity but also higher rates of food insecurity. Unreliable access to healthy food can lead to obesity as well as anxiety and other mental health issues, which further threaten military retention and mission readiness.

"Despite efforts by the US government and Department of Defense, [obesity](#) continues to impact the military and the risk to [national security](#) is great," stresses Dr. Police. "Research to uncover best practices will consider the increasing diversity within the armed forces, the importance of access to healthy food, and the opportunity to support [nutrition](#) education through informed leadership."

More information: The US Military's Battle With Obesity, *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jneb.2022.12.003](#)

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