



The Fattening of America: How the Economy Makes Us Fat, If It Matters, and What to Do about It

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In *The Fattening of America*, renowned health economist Eric Finkelstein, along with business writer Laurie Zuckerman, reveal how the U.S. economy has become the driving force behind our expanding waistlines. Blending theory, research, and engaging personal anecdotes the authors discuss how declining food costs--especially for high-calorie, low-nutrient foods--and an increasing usage of technology, which make Americans more sedentary, has essentially led us to eat more calories than we burn off.

The Fattening of America: How the Economy Makes Us Fat, If It Matters, and What to Do about It Details

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Margaret says

Don't Super Size Me

Author Eric A. Finklestein sorts out the pros and cons of what is making not only Americans fat, but why the whole world's population is getting obese. The Fattening of America holds everyone accountable for the weight gain of the entire world. The author cites lack of exercise, super-sized high calorie fast foods, gourmet meals, and sitting behind desks all day. Those factors coupled with the boob tube and video games have fattened every culture in the world leaving us with bulging waistlines. Our nation's children are shockingly unfit, as they tend to do indoor activities instead of outdoor active play.

It is cheaper to eat calorie-laden foods rather than fresh foods because they are cheaper than fresh fruits and vegetables. Farmers are subsidized to plant wheat and corn so many other crops are not raised, thus raising the prices. The use of high fructose corn syrup used to make soft drinks and sweet foods (cake, cookies, pies) is addictive because your body does not digest it as readily as it does sugar, creating a craving that is never quite satisfied. Sugar which your body can easily metabolize is substituted with high fructose corn syrup because is cheaper and lengthens the shelf life of dry goods.

Another contributing factor is the use of medicine that often has the side effect of adding unwanted pounds. Many common drugs that we use daily has this effect upon the human body. While a person can choose not to eat high calorie foods, it is often hard to eliminate medicines. Solutions have been pondered, such as imposing a fat tax (putting extra cents on junk food), making communities more walking friendly

.

I believe that there will be no easy solution, it will take a lot of effort both from the individual that suffers from obesity and the government. Finklestein raises many valid points and has offered a lot of insight on the obesity problem. In fact there are so many points, that you must really read this book to understand the scope of the Fat problem.

Reviewed by Margaret Ball
APOOO BookClub

Kater Cheek says

This book explains, in a logical economics format, why Americans have been getting fatter as the years have gone on. The writing is good and engaging, though some of the charts seemed unnecessary. Two things I disliked: one, the author says that a high BMI(body mass index)=overweight/obese without acknowledging that one can have a high BMI without being overweight. Two, his tone came off as smug and condescending at times, especially when he brags (more than once) about running marathons.

Kate says

The book just isn't that compelling. Bookstores (And my book shelves) are littered with great books about the obesity epidemic (anything by Nestle, The Hungry Gene, FF Nation, even Food Fight...) that are better written. I just felt like the author saw a bandwagon and jumped on it in an effort to sell some books and make some money. He doesn't seem particularly educated on the topic (like Dr. Nestle or Dr. Brownell) and the book doesn't seem particularly well researched.

Dan says

I read this book for an online class on Obesity Economics and found it a nice intro to the subject. The author spends a bit too much time referencing everything to one of three family members and their opinions and ways of coping, as a way of demonstrating his points, but in the end I think it came across a little bit silly on that basis. He's also a bit whiny about being the only person he knows, more or less, who's as committed to fighting obesity as he is, especially other parents in his community. I can't imagine he's a lot of fun at block parties. On the positive side there was a lot of good information, particularly on the impact of various government programs over the decades, both successful and not - so as a basis for the class it was a good backup to the lectures.

Nuzhat says

I read this for a class I took Principles of Obesity Economics. It did help to flesh out the points the professor would make in his 15 minute lectures. While other reviewers were put off by the pretentiousness of the author, I can look past that and analyze his points. As this was my first economic class I've ever taken, I learned a bunch of economic terms and I've certainly seen first hand as a health care provider the consequences of obesity.

Kyle says

An interesting political and economic argument about how the US government should approach the obesity crisis. Changed my viewpoint on a couple components.

Sarah Sammis says

The Fattening of America looks at the economics behind obesity. It looks at the possible economic causes of obesity, the costs to health care, the costs to businesses and the rise of "wellness programs" as a reaction and what people can do to lose the extra weight they've gained.

The book is full of charts and data and when the focus is on economics, it is a fascinating read. Unfortunately

the book tends towards the same chit-chatty approach that is so popular with self-help books. This informal voice strives to make the data more approachable but it just gets in the way of the over-all message of how changing economic conditions may be contributing to rising rates of obesity.

One large focus of the book is also the rising rates of children who are overweight (government speak for obese). While I agree that childhood obesity is something that parents should strive to avoid, I found parenting advice too heavy handed.

I enjoyed reading *The Fattening of America* but it could have been better. The bits about Uncle Al and all the parenting examples get in the way of an otherwise fascinating economic study.

Jill says

I am increasingly concerned/obsessed with the state of Americans' lack of attention to health and healthfulness, and have been reading up to try and put together a clear picture of why Americans are as fat and sick as they are. While I appreciated the author's economic perspective (and realize that it was the sole perspective its economist author chose to offer), his limited focus on rationality and utility left no wiggle room for cultural change. I understand, for example, that Americans won't change their behaviors if it does not affect their wallets, but I believe that the fattening of America is due not only to economic factors but also to an increasing culture of acceptance for poor eating habits and lack of activity. So while it may not discourage people, and particularly economically stable people, from buying two-litres of soda, a fat tax COULD contribute to a culture of disapproval for the constant presence of soda at birthday parties, holidays, company parties, dinners out, etc. Despite this, I really enjoyed the book and appreciate its perspective and particularly its focus on childhood obesity as something that can be prevented. As I was nearly crushed in the halls of a middle school after a child's orchestra concert by the pure mass of the audience members, it occurred to me that pretty soon we are going to have bigger hallways in addition to the couches, toilets, and airplane seats Finkelstein mentions. It's some pretty scary stuff. Trying to understand the epidemic is a step in the right direction.

Rachel says

Finkelstein uses the phrase "tasty food" too often, but he does have some good points on both a macro- and micro economic scale about why the country and the entire world is becoming obese. He also has some good suggestions, such as ending the farm subsidies for corn and soy (commodities that become ingredients in junk food) and instead incentivizing farmers to grow vegetables. His point is that as long as fattening food is cheap and our societal norms encourage inactivity we will continue to get fat, as a country.

Alex says

Although I read this for work, it was very enjoyable. It really offers insight into the economy of obesity, from who's to blame through how to lose weight (and how the government can or cannot help). This is the rough draft of the review I gave for work (at a dietitian magazine):

For people who think that everyone should lose weight and fit in the ideal body mass index (BMI), this book

is not for you. However, for those who can start this book with an open mind, and are willing to stick it through until the end, I think they will take something from this book. Finkelstein offers insight and knowledge into aspects of weight loss that, since his considerations are economic-based, dietitians may have not considered.

"Fattening of America" is aimed for the common consumer, which proves useful when Finkelstein begins discussing economics. Because of this, some messages feel a little "dumbed down" and are often repeated, but for the most part the book relies on studies, facts, and research (he is an obesity researcher, after all) to develop his points.

What's interesting is that as an economist and obesity researcher, he looks at things differently than a dietitian would. For example, when deciding why (and if) people should care about obesity's increase in adults (he analyzes children separately), he doesn't point out health concerns like stroke and heart attacks, except in their relation to cost to society (through taxes). While this may seem cold hearted, he points out people choose, often with the knowledge about the health conditions related to obesity, to eat what they eat and not exercise with an understanding that it will lead to obesity. With this in mind, he doesn't think that we should help obese individuals simply because they are obese unless there is an underlying reason, such as it costs tax payers money.

He also views the way to go about ending the so-called obesity epidemic differently. Instead of approaching the individual and teaching healthy eating and exercising, he advocates for making healthy eating and exercising easier and cheaper for people, which will naturally make people more inclined to participate.

One way in which he thinks this should be done is through the Farm Bill. Currently (at the time that the book was written) the Farm Bill subsidized corn, soy, and wheat production. This makes products of these plants (like corn syrup and partially hydrogenated soybean oil) cheap to make. Since these are primary ingredients for fast, frozen, and highly-processed foods, it results in those foods being cheap, while fresh fruits and vegetables are increasingly expensive. He targets this as one reason that obesity (especially among lower income people) increased, in hand with highly processed foods. He believes that the corn and soy subsidization should be stopped and possibly moved to fruits and vegetables to lower their costs.

By lowering the cost of fruits and vegetables and raising the cost of highly processed foods, people will be inclined to choose the cheaper food and start eating healthier because it's the most utility maximizing, a term he uses often in the book. Of course people will still eat out and eat processed foods due to time constraints, but as the price of processed foods rises and the price of fruits and vegetables decreases, restaurants will also be more likely to use the cheaper ingredient, which may lead to healthier foods on menus. This alteration to the Farm Bill might not resolve all obesity, but will be sure to decrease some, especially those people who have time to cook but because they live on a low budget, find their dollar better spent on processed food which won't spoil. He backs up this economic theory with studies he and colleagues have done in schools and work places where healthy food prices were decreased while unhealthy food prices were raised to cover the cost difference. People chose the healthy foods twice as often as they had previously.

The final section is very light and stresses that this is only his way of losing weight, though he does say that research and studies have shown his methods are consistent with recommended changes. His main point is that the changes have to be slight enough that the person won't mind making them, but great enough to make a change. He rates it as "something you're willing to do 80% of the time."

Amy says

I think the author is preaching to the choir since I decided 3 years ago to figure out why I had become obese and do something about it, but I'm still looking forward to reading this book about what's making Americans obese, why we should care, and what should be done before the situation gets terribly out of hand.

Note: While I critique both purchased and free books in the same way, I'm legally obligated to tell you I received this book free through the Amazon Vine program in return for my review. Blah blah blah.

E says

This book absolutely brings a unique (albeit now-outdated) perspective to the ongoing discussion of obesity and how it can be addressed. I will also give credit for its fun, conversational tone that felt like I was being talked to instead of at.

However, I found the conclusions irresponsible, appallingly depressing, and completely out of touch. Take the oft-mentioned "Cousin Carl," the author's avatar for the low-wage, barely-making-ends-meet, possibly poorly-educated segment of our population (and it's not a small segment, either). Finkelstein alleges that Carl eats unhealthy fast food because it is "utility maximizing" for him to do so; that is, Carl *chooses* this food because it provides him a lot of calories for not a lot of money (important when money is tight), is convenient and easy (important when time is at a premium due to multiple jobs for example), and tastes good (important when it can feel, for someone in poverty, like there isn't much happiness or pleasure to be gleaned from a life lived on the margins). This argument utterly neglects the humanity of Carl and his situation. Sure, Carl does in fact "choose" fast food for all of the reasons Finkelstein lists. However, can this really constitute a choice when his hand is essentially forced by his poor economic situation? Can I really point my finger at someone struggling to survive in a country that cares very little for the poverty-stricken, and claim that they are at fault for making poor choices and that's why they are obese? This implies that other, better choices, *unaccompanied by enormous costs of one kind or another*, are available. I assure you that they are not. Plentiful and powerful barriers exist: lack of education for good nutrition; lack of time to shop for and prepare healthy, nourishing foods at home when there are multiple jobs and lengthy public transportation or walking commutes to be negotiated; lack of safe space for physical activity beyond one's own apartment; lack of access to whole foods for purchase anywhere within a reasonable distance; and lack of money to address any of the above deficits.

Carl is "utility maximizing" when he buys fast food, all right. But Finkelstein misses entirely the other side of that equation: Carl shouldn't *have to* be in a situation where fast food makes the most "sense." This, then, is where I vehemently support the government's addressing obesity by giving people like Carl *real* choices. THIS IS A COMPELLING PUBLIC NEED.

Nichola says

This well reasoned book was a bit dry. Economists can always prove their points with lots of data- anything bought and sold is measured and they can pick whatever set of numbers supports their POV. I totally agreed that the economy encourages weight gain. But his continued analysis ends with saying we don't need to do anything about it. As I am not similarly dexterous and equipt with figures, I ended up feeling a bit deflated- this book made me feel like efforts to encourage people to be their best selves by eating healthy foods and

being active, along with not buying into corporation's profit margin influenced marketing was pointless. His final points have something to do with how buying diet books and devices to support overweight people all make money too and are part of the economy?!

He did help me understand some terms and policies- (Farm bill, Food Stamps, compelling public need, market failure. And he did support intervention in the case of children, based on their quality of life measurements.

Rama says

The corporate economic order for peeling away the pounds

This is a semi-academic book with significant references to the original research papers published in peer reviewed academic journals. The title of the book may lure a large number of readers who would be interested in slimming, dieting, and shedding pounds, but this book is about the economics of obesity. Hence, this is useful for economists, academics, sociologists, and journalists.

The problem of obesity has surged across the globe over the last 30 years (Chapter 1), Obesity has become a social problem as indicated by CDC (Center for Disease Control) data that obese population have doubled from 1961 - 2003. Poverty seems to increase obesity; the percentage obese population among different races is almost the same between 2001 and 2004 (Chapter 1). Confronting the obesity/overweight problem is to decrease the calories intake. The economic forces that increase the food production simultaneously lowered the purchase costs for the consumer, which raised the food consumption, and thus caused the obesity problem to increase (Chapter 2). But the cost of physical activities such as fitness centers, health clubs and various fitness products and services have increased thus preventing obesity decrease among some population (Chapters 2 and 3). It would be useful and comforting for weight watchers to know that a can of Coca Cola has more calories than a cup of milk (Chapter 2). Calories burned are higher for running than bicycling. Mowing the lawn and weeding garden has significant calorie burning activity (Chapter 3). The authors also argue that the effect of digital and electronic technology, dominated by increased TV and computer use is making the society less willing to include exercise in their daily routines (Chapter 3). This has resulted in increase quick fixes such as using prescription medications to combat obesity and related medical problems (Chapter 5). It turns out that 50% of total leisure time is spent on watching TV and only about 5% of leisure time is spent on sports and exercise (Chapter 3). Chapter 4 discusses the other factors that contribute to obesity and chapter five is interesting for economists where monetary and opportunity costs associated with fighting obesity are discussed. Prescription medications such as antidepressants, antipsychotics, diabetes, and steroid hormones are known to have weight gaining side effects (Chapter 4). Smoking curbs appetite and hence lowers the obesity problem. Many of these medications solve one problem, usually their intended use but cause secondary problems; the overall result is that it is not positive for the consumer.

Chapter 6 deals with consequences of obesity for consumers, employers and the government. Obesity is also strongly associated with working routines; more obese do less work than normal, and obese women are more prone to miss work than men (Chapter 6). Chapter 7, 8 and 9 discusses government strategies aimed at reducing the obesity rates in adults and young people. Probability of obesity as a function of family income shows that obesity level decreases as the income increases, and this has profound effect among blacks than whites, but among Hispanics, higher family income does not seem to have any positive effect (Chapter 9). Support for more childhood intervention strategies includes more physical education, and education on healthy food, but people oppose an increase in the cost of less-healthy food (Chapter 9). Chapter 10 deals

with strategies of private sector to fight obesity and chapter 11 provides an economic survey of obesity related products and services. The last chapter is of some interest to the slimmers; the authors provide an economists view of keeping weight under control. The number of health club members have grown more than twice from 1987 to 2005. The book is filled with economic statistics, which may not interest the average reader intending to burn the fat.

Teena in Toronto says

I find books about weight loss interesting.

Though I found Finkelstein to be an arrogant ass, there was some interesting info.

It didn't preach how to lose weight and offer a new and improved diet plan.

It was more about why we are becoming overweight ... junk food is cheap and available, healthy nutritious foods are more expensive, we are working more so don't have time to exercise, etc.

Is the fact that we have medical plans that take care of us encouraging us to not lose weight? We pop pills to make us well.

Should governments impose "fat taxes" on foods that contain lots of sugar and fat like they do with cigarettes and alcohol?

If parents have allow their children to be overweight, is it child abuse?

What do you think?
