DANCING THE TOO FAT POLKA

People of a certain age will remember the "Too Fat Polka": *Oh, I don't want her, you can have her, she's too fat for me… She's a twosome, She's a foursome, If she'd lose some, I'd like her more some.* Well, depending on your point of view, the bad or good news is that more and more people, women *and* men, are becoming "too fat for me."

Over the past thirty years, the number of Americans who are obese has doubled, to almost one-third of the population; we are seeing more and more overweight and obese children, upwards of 15% in all. The USA leads the world on this unhappy list, but the same trends are being seen in Europe, Asia, even some parts of Africa.

(Fatness is measured by how much you weigh for how tall you are, the Body-Mass Index, or BMI. Our government considers a BMI from 25-30 to be overweight; over 30, obese. The Centers for Disease Control website can calculate your BMI for you: http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/bmi/adult_BMI/english_bmi_calculator/bmi_calculator.htm .)

What is going on? It's calories. People these days are taking in more food calories and expending fewer exercise calories. Consider that 3500 calories is equivalent to one pound of body weight. All you need is to take in 35 calories more each day or expend 35 calories less; by the end of the year you will have gained 3.65 pounds, and 37 pounds in ten years, the "middle-age spread" explained. Simple. Well, not quite. Our bodies aren't just steam engines to be stoked. In the days when our hunter-gatherer ancestors were roaming the plains and forests looking for food, they couldn't be sure of a meal in any one day, much less three square. Those who survived to hand down their genes were the ones whose bodies could store the occasional mammoth feast as fat, to be used up in lean times. A modern weight-loss diet is like being unsuccessful in the hunt; during a diet our bodies *slow down* to conserve energy, which is why it is hard to lose weight until we have convinced our brain that we mean to be thinner.

Then there are the persons we all know who can "eat anything" and never gain weight. These are the fidgety-feet type, always dancing about, jiggling some part of their bodies; they burn off those extra calories.

In the past thirty years we've seen a lot of changes in our lives that affect the energy equation: More couch-potatoing in front of the TV; driving instead of walking; less phys. ed. in school; cheap calorie-dense foods like sugared soft drinks and pizza; more eating out; fast foods sold in bigger portions like "Big Gulp," "Monster Thickburger," and the growth in the size of a Big Mac.

There's another twist: A lot of carbohydrates these days are too easy to digest: white bread, polished rice, cold sugared cereal, corn-syrup solids, for instance. The carbs enter

the bloodstream quickly, causing our insulin levels to shoot up to handle the load; but then our blood sugar falls too fast, soon making us feel hungry again.

But what's wrong with being overweight?   A lot. Whether taking a snapshot across the whole population or by following people for several decades, for each BMI value over 27 there is an increased risk of many diseases: Type 2 diabetes, gallbladder and heart disease, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, osteoarthritis, and even some kinds of cancer. Fat around the waist seems worse for you than around the hips and buttocks.

But like Goldilocks and the three bears, studies show being too thin isn't 'just right' either. Following that old half-truth from the Duchess of Windsor, "No woman can be too rich or too thin," many young women try to lose weight by smoking, or are afraid to quit because they might gain a few pounds. A very bad idea. "Moderation in everything" is the key phrase (except with respect to smoking, where total abstinence is the only healthy option). Multi-grain cereals, beans and nuts, olive oil, lots of fruit and vegetables, moderate exercise, easy on the alcohol, seems to be the healthier way to go.

What we consider 'fat' is also socially constructed. In these days of aggressive weight loss programs we make overweight people feel guilty; very overweight people even face discrimination in finding work or mates. This can't be right or fair. What we call 'fat' was once beautiful: Look at the paintings of Rubens, Manet. Marilyn Monroe wore a size 14. *Zaftig,* plump and juicy like a peach, is a compliment in Yiddish. More than just beauty, being 'overweight' was a sign of health and prosperity in women *and* men. Remember the "Too Fat Polka?" One version ends, *So I sure want her, you can't have her/ She's just right for me*.

Norbert Hirschhorn
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