

I've written in the past about the American obesity epidemic. Obesity rates have continued to climb in the United States, though the rate of increase has leveled out. But obesity is also on the rise globally. The obesity rate has increased everywhere. In [nine countries](#), at least one out of five people is now obese: South Africa (23.3%), USA (32%), Brazil (21.4%), Mexico (25%), Egypt (30%), Iran (20.1%), Iraq (21%), Russia (21.5%), and Turkey (26%).

What's causing this global increase? Scientists have lots of ideas but nothing like a definitive answer. Theories [abound](#): too many carbohydrates and ultra-processed foods; chemical residues in foods; food insecurity; genetic/environmental interactions; changes in gut bacteria. Whatever the causes may be, they have more [impact](#) on some groups than others – West Virginians versus Californians, blacks and Latinos versus Asian Americans, high school dropouts versus college graduates. Once obesity occurs treatment is difficult. There are very promising new drugs but they [cost](#) \$1000 or more a month.

The biggest concern about obesity is its health impact. There are also variations on that dimension. Obesity is a major risk factor for type 2 diabetes and other ills, but some obese people are perfectly healthy.

It's hard to prove causation, but we know some factors that are strongly associated with obesity rates, such as the prevalence of junk foods and sugared drinks, lack of opportunities for walking and exercise; and increased exposure to TV and other sedentary activities. Thus, there is good reason to think that practices which are good for the environment, such as healthier diets and walkable communities, would also help reduce obesity.

There's a larger point. For many, the first impulse is to blame obesity on moral failings and personal weakness. One thing we know about obesity is that "naming and shaming" doesn't work. In general, we are too prone to blame individuals rather than the circumstances in which they find themselves. I suspect that is also true in the environmental context. It may be more effective to identify the factors that push them in that direction, and address those rather than pointing a finger at people whose behavior we want to change.