Preface to "What Causes Obesity?"

*Obesity*, 2010

Most health experts agree that there is no single cause of obesity. Rather, a combination of factors is to blame for the problem. Some people likely carry a genetic predisposition for obesity—that is, due to their genetic makeup, they are more likely than others to become obese. Other factors include an increasingly sedentary lifestyle; people today are more likely to spend their workday sitting at a desk than plowing a field. In addition, people have less time for preparing healthy meals and may lack the money for the ingredients for those meals; therefore, they increasingly rely on cheap foods—such as fast-food restaurant meals—that are high in calories but low in nutrition. All of these causes and others likely contribute to the problem of obesity.

Underlying the various causes of obesity may be one biological imperative: evolution may have conditioned the human body to become obese. In prehistoric times, food was scarce. Those whose bodies were able to conserve energy were more likely to survive and pass this trait on. Therefore, the human body was ingrained with the ability to store energy reserves in the form of fat, thus enabling it to survive times of scarcity between hunts. As explained by Elizabeth Kolbert, a staff writer for the *New Yorker* magazine, "Early humans lived ... hand to mouth. In good times, they needed to stockpile food for use in hard times, but the only place they had to store it was on themselves.... As a consequence, a person with a genetic knack for storing fat would have had a competitive advantage."

However, what was a competitive advantage during prehistoric times may be a liability in modern society. The human body retains the ability to store energy, but for most people this trait is no longer needed; food is cheap, plentiful, and energy-rich, and it is easily obtained with little energy. As stated by pediatrician Jimmy Unger, "Our 'hunt' consists of getting into our car and buying a tasty two-dollar, 2,000-calorie meal from a drive-through window. Now that we no longer depend on an occasional bison kill or a successful harvest of roots and berries, the very same traits that once guaranteed our survival now hurt us."

Evolution cannot fully explain the increase in obesity in recent years. Most likely it is just one piece of the puzzle, along with other factors such as exercise, nutrition, and advertising. These and other issues are debated in the following chapter on the causes of obesity.

**Further Readings**

**Books**


