

# PILING ON THE POUNDS

The UK could be an obese society by 2050 if we don't act now – but that will require fundamental changes to our modern lifestyle, warns **Dr Susan Jebb**

“The average body weight of UK adults has risen each year since the middle of the 20th century. In 1980, around seven per cent of people were classified as clinically obese – having a body mass index (BMI) of over 30. By October 2007 that had more than trebled to nearly a quarter of adults and 15 per cent of children aged two to ten. In the government's Foresight report on tackling obesity, we extrapolated current trends to reveal that 40 per cent of people could be obese by 2025, and 60 per cent by 2050.

Obesity is linked to a range of chronic diseases. The risk of developing type two diabetes is about 20 times more likely for people who are obese. And obesity is second only to smoking as a risk factor for cancer.

Using Department of Health data, we projected that the cost of obesity to the NHS could double to £10bn a year by 2050. But the wider cost to employers and the economy will be much greater: about £50bn a year at today's prices. Higher rates of obesity are associated with more time off work, early retirements and more disability pensions.

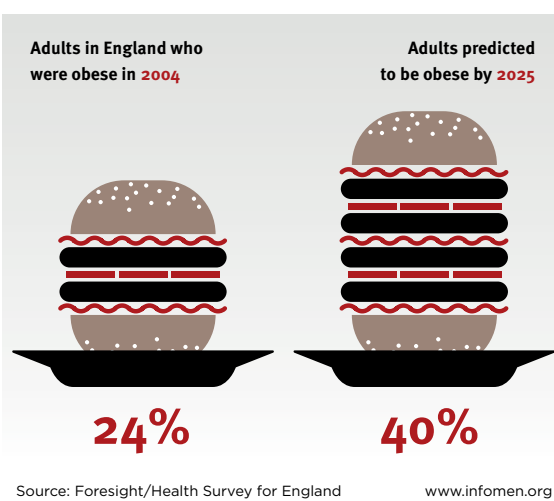
## Changing behaviour

Why are three times more people overweight today than 30 years ago? Have we had a national collapse in our willpower? That isn't very likely. Clearly there is an element of personal responsibility, but the environment also shapes people's behaviour. For many people, weight gain is the inevitable – and largely involuntary – consequence of a modern lifestyle. Technology has changed our world: the distances we can commute, or more office-based work, for instance. A lot of people don't eat as well as they could, or aren't as physically active as they should be, because they don't have time.

There are parallels between the factors causing obesity and those causing climate change. They are both long-term problems, which will not be cracked quickly, and they both need a combination of individual responsibility and institutional change.

Simply telling people to eat less and exercise more doesn't work. We need an environment in which people are supported to make healthy choices, because if the world is set against them, it isn't surprising that controlling their weight becomes hard. The lessons from smoking cessation show us that you have to start by raising awareness that this is a serious health risk,

## THE UK'S OBESITY PROBLEM



Source: Foresight/Health Survey for England [www.infomen.org](http://www.infomen.org)

and then, if the pace of voluntary change is not sufficient, work up to increasingly strong regulation. Managing obesity is in its very early stages, but it is likely we will see more interventions to change our environment and food supply.

The government has taken vital steps forward. We now have a national obesity strategy plan, *Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives*, which sets out a framework of policies and actions that can evolve as needed.

We need government to lead by setting out the blueprint and the direction of travel, but it cannot possibly change everything. The responsibility also lies with the private sector and individuals. The good news is that companies are beginning to make changes. The best food companies have stepped up the pace of change, reformulating products and introducing healthier choices. Games console makers are also producing more active games, which is encouraging.

But there isn't a single miraculous solution. There's a whole raft of things needed, and we will only achieve a system-wide shift by working across them all. ”

**DR SUSAN JEBB** is head of nutrition and health at the MRC Human Nutrition Research centre and chair of the cross-government expert advisory group on obesity.

» Visit [www.foresight.gov.uk](http://www.foresight.gov.uk)

## THREE BIG CHALLENGES

### » 1

Tackle the trend of obesity in children, to ensure people stay leaner for longer

### » 2

Develop interventions that change individual behaviour and our environment to build in more exercise and healthier eating habits

### » 3

Keep employees healthy; ensure employers realise the benefits of keeping their workforce fit