

Obesity



Noteworthy:

- In 2003, 34.1% of adult Albertans were considered to be overweight; 15.5% of adult Albertans were considered to be obese.
- In 2003, Statistics Canada reported that 45.3% of adult Albertans were considered to be in a normal weight class, compared with 49.1% of the adult population in 1994.
- A recent Statistics Canada survey found that almost one-quarter of Canadians who had been overweight in 1994/1995 had become obese by 2002/2003.
- According to the 2004 Survey on Health and Health Systems in Alberta, 24.7% of male survey respondents and 34.2% of female survey respondents increased the amount of exercise they do as a means to improve their health.
- A national study of obesity among young Canadians found a dramatic increase in overweight teens and youth; in 1999, roughly 29% of boys and 24% of girls were overweight.

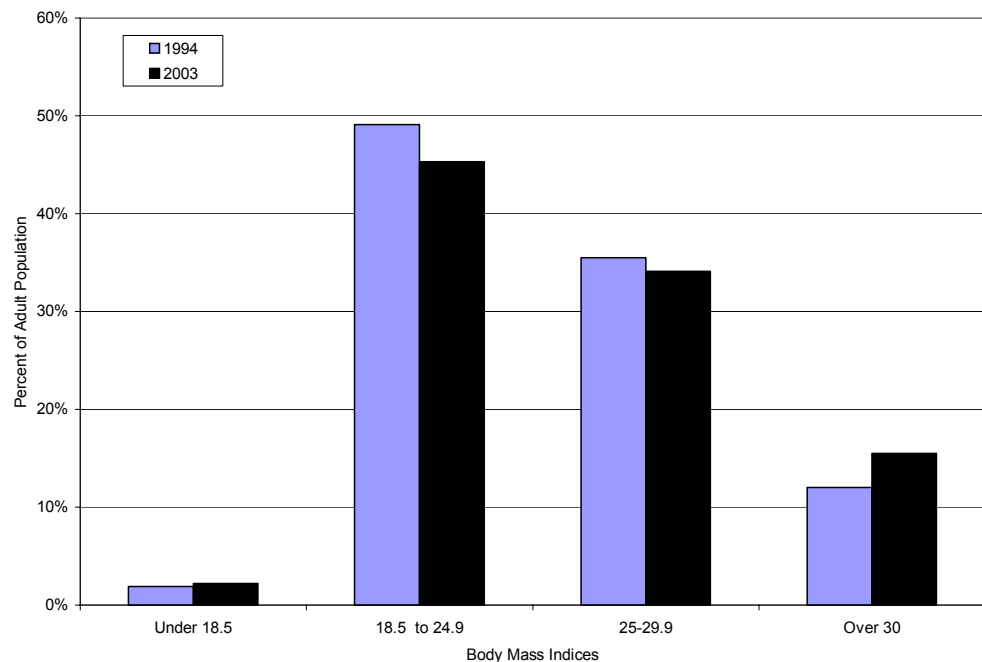
Obesity in Alberta: How Much?

Obesity is an increasingly important dimension of human health as more Albertans, Canadians and particularly Americans are overweight. The GDP makes no distinction between healthy eating and unhealthy eating; GDP rises with each expenditure—whether healthy food or “junk” food. Advertising expenditures to entice consumption of processed junk food also contribute to GDP even if intuitively we know that such

expenditures do not contribute to genuine well-being and good health. The Alberta GPI accounts reveal that Albertans are getting fatter by the year due to poor eating habits and lack of exercise. Based on Statistics Canada data in 1994, an estimated 223,823 Albertans (or 12.0% of the population aged 18 years and older) were obese; that is, they had a Body Mass Index (BMI) of 30 or more. By 2003, 356,529 Albertans (or 15.5% of the population aged

18 years and older) were considered obese (they had a body mass index greater than 30). That is a 29% increase in the number of obese adults in the province of Alberta in just 9 years. The figure below shows an increase in the percent of adult Albertans who are obese and a decline in the percent of adult Albertans who are normal (BMI between 18.5 and 24.9) between 1994 and 2003.

Trend in Body Weights in Alberta (Body Mass Indices), 1994 and 2003



Source: Statistics Canada, CANSIM Table 105-4009

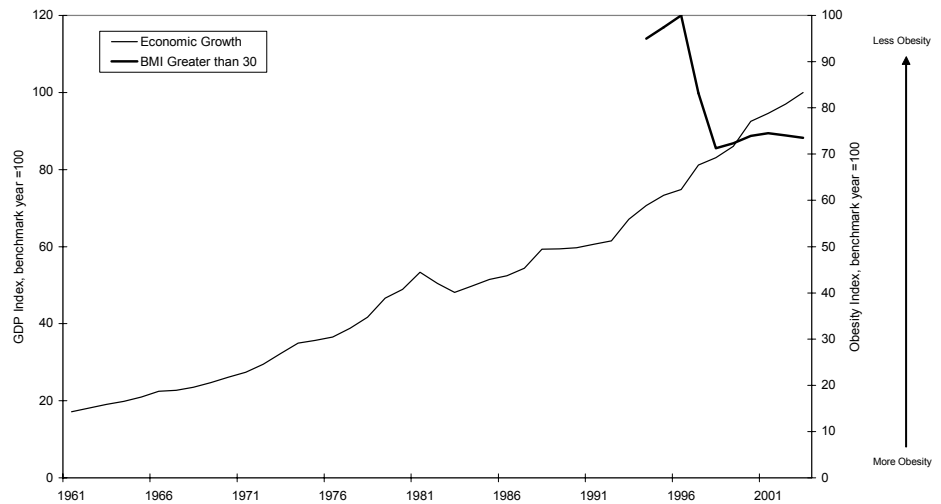
So What?

As economic prosperity has grown, so too have our waistlines. The more we consume, the greater our ecological footprint, including our food footprint. Rising levels of consumption of food and other goods and services contribute to rising GDP. As the figure to the right shows, although the two are not correlated, the GPI index for obesity shows a declining condition (i.e. there are more obese adults in Alberta today than in the past) as the GDP index rises.

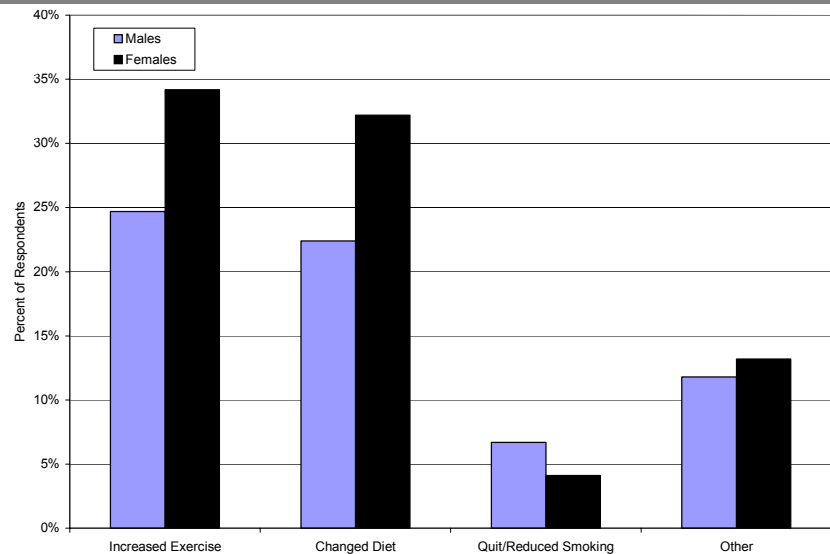
Precise estimates of the cost of obesity and unhealthy living are unavailable for Alberta. Studies on the economic costs of obesity in the U.S. in 1995 estimated a cost of US \$99.2-billion or \$377.53 per obese American, including direct medical expenditures on disease associated with obesity, and indirect costs such as loss of productivity.

As we indulge in unhealthy meals, junk food, and lifestyles, then counter this with dieting, the GDP keeps rising—indifferent to healthy or unhealthy lifestyle choices. In fact, a healthy, locally-grown diet would show up as a reduction in GDP. The GDP also makes no distinction between the full costs and benefits of money spent on nutritious food baskets, grown at home or bought in farmers' markets and food that is grown, processed, preserved, and shipped thousands of kilometres to distant markets. Neither do our national and provincial accounts track the full health costs due to poor nutrition. Sustainable living is intuitively about a healthy lifestyle, including diet.

Alberta Obesity Index, 1991 to 1999



Percent of Survey Respondents who Made Changes in the Previous 12 Months to Improve Their Health



Source: 2004 Survey About Health and Health Related Systems in Alberta completed for Alberta Health and Wellness.

As an index, obesity in Alberta in 2003 scored 72 on a scale of 0 to 100, where 100 is the lowest level of obesity that occurred between 1994 and 2003 (years in which data are consistently available).

Using a conservative 1995 U.S. estimate of the cost of obesity of US \$377.53 per overweight and obese person, we estimate that obesity in Alberta cost roughly \$550 million (Canadian) in direct and indirect costs- the equivalent of 0.4% of Alberta's GDP in 2003.

