

Kat Collins
The State of Weight
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This past year, the [Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine](#) (PCRM) put up [a series of billboards in Albany, New York](#), displaying a man's belly bulging over his belt, captioned "Your Abs on Cheese," and another of a woman's large dimpled legs, captioned "Your Thighs on Cheese." Their point? "Cheese is loaded with fat, cholesterol, sodium, and calories," states PCRM. "It should come with a warning label." PCRM president Dr. Neal Barnard has repeatedly called cheese "dairy crack." The Washington D.C.-based group, which aggressively promotes a vegan diet for Americans, targeted Albany because more than half of its adult residents are overweight or obese; they put similar billboards in Wisconsin, the cheesemaking epicenter of the United States.

Obesity has become an American epidemic in the past 20 years; Europe isn't far behind. While an estimated 63.1 percent of Americans are overweight or obese, about half the population of Europe falls into the same categories. Interestingly, though, in France—where 96 percent of the population eats cheese at a per capita rate of about 52 pounds a year (versus 29.8 pounds for Americans)—the incidence of obesity is one of the lowest in Europe.

While PCRM contends that cheese is the largest cause of our obesity epidemic, many experts reject this simplistic theory. Excessive weight gain results from many interacting factors in our "obesogenic" culture, they argue. But as data accumulates on the subject, two factors in particular appear to parallel the soaring national weight gain: what we eat and how much of it. Statistically, the six top calorie sources in the current U.S. diet are grain-based desserts (cake, cookies, etc.), breads, chicken-based dishes, sweetened beverages, pizza, and alcoholic beverages.

Un-Super-Size It

It can be tricky to grasp a reasonable portion size of artisan cheese when it's not individually sliced and wrapped in cellophane like commodity cheese. Here's a visual cue: Three dice cubes are equivalent to about one ounce of natural block cheese. About a quarter cup of shredded cheese is also about one ounce.

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1 ounce

Our food has become more like an institutional cafeteria diet, awash in a large variety of packaged foods, takeout fast food, and sweetened beverages. Studies also show a nearly 20 percent increase in per capita calorie intake since the 1980s. If anything can

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single-handedly account for the increase in body fatness over the past 30 years, it is this whopping increase in calories we're consuming. Even Barnard has stated, "Studies clearly show that weight gain in the United States over the past 30 years is almost entirely due to changing eating habits." Why pick on just cheese then? Some say it's because the real mission of PCRM is to promote animal rights disguised as nutrition advice. They point to the fact that a significant portion of PCRM's funding comes from the founder of the Animal Rights Foundation of Florida as well as PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), of which Barnard was a past president. PCRM has also been at the forefront of lobbying against the use of animals for medical research.

Outside of PCRM, most health practitioners take a big-picture approach to the problem of obesity. Lisa Close, a registered dietician with Sacred Heart Hospital in Allentown, Pennsylvania, says, "There are so many other contributing factors that need to be looked at besides just cheese. You have to consider predominant lifestyle, and then genetics, socioeconomic, cultural views toward diet, lack of education, environment, and more."

That said, Close and other nutrition experts don't deny that cheese is an energydense food, having on average about 100 calories per ounce and about eight grams of fat. But so are other wholesome foods. Walnuts, for instance, have a generous 18 grams of fat and 185 calories per ounce (they are, incidentally, approved by PCRM).

The richness of cheese, one can also argue, is also an asset. It's the reason why most of us are satisfied eating just a few slices or ounces. Cheese is not like other fat- and protein-rich foods, such as meats and poultry, which typically get polished off in eight-ounce servings. The average individual cheese plate in a restaurant is a three- or four-ounce serving. Such reasonable portioning is the healthy key to having your cheese and eating it too.

Written by Kat Collins

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<http://www.culturecheesemag.com/cheese-iq/state-of-weight>