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Key Obesogenic Forces: The Hidden Drivers of Weight Gain

Obesogenic forces are the environmental, societal, technological, and biological factors that actively promote overweight and obesity in modern life. These forces interact to create an environment where weight gain is the default outcome for most people, despite good intentions. Below are the major categories of obesogenic forces.

1. Ultra-Processed Food Supply

The single most powerful obesogenic force is the modern food industry's dominance of ultra-processed foods (UPFs)—products made from industrial ingredients with added sugars, refined fats, salt, emulsifiers, chemical additives, and flavor enhancers.

- Engineered hyper-palatability: These foods hit the brain's reward centers harder than natural foods, driving overconsumption (e.g., you can easily eat 1,000 calories of chips or ice cream without feeling full).
- Poor satiety: Soft textures and rapid digestion mean weak signals to the brain to stop eating.
- Ubiquitous and cheap: Subsidies for corn, soy, and wheat keep high-fructose corn syrup and refined oils inexpensive, while whole foods remain relatively more costly.
- Aggressive marketing: Billions spent targeting children and adults, normalizing constant snacking and sugary drinks.

2. Constant Food Cues and Availability

Food is no longer something we seek—it seeks us.

- Advertising everywhere: TV, social media, billboards, and sponsored content create relentless consumption and cravings.
- 24/7 access: Vending machines, delivery apps, convenience stores, and drive-throughs make calorie-dense food available at any hour.
- Supersized portions: Restaurant and packaged servings have doubled or tripled since the 1970s, recalibrating what we consider "normal."
- Seasonal food scarcity is gone: Year-round abundance removes natural periods of lower intake.

3. Human-Built Sedentary Environment

Modern infrastructure is designed for sitting, not moving.

- Car-centric cities: Sprawling suburbs, poor public transit, and lack of sidewalks discourage walking.
- Screen-based work and leisure: Desk jobs, streaming, and smartphones keep people seated for 8–12 hours daily.
- Reduced incidental movement: Online shopping, food delivery, and remote controls eliminate small but cumulative calorie-burning activities.
- Labor-saving tools and devices reduce physical energy demand.

4. Sleep Disruption and Chronic Stress

Poor sleep and high stress directly impair metabolic regulation.

- Artificial light and screens: Blue light at night suppresses melatonin, shortening and fragmenting sleep.
- Shift work and long hours: Common schedules misalign circadian rhythms.
- Stress hormones: Elevated cortisol from work, finances, or social pressure promotes visceral fat storage and cravings for comfort foods.

5. Endocrine-Disrupting Chemicals (Obesogens)

Thousands of synthetic chemicals interfere with hormones that control weight.

- Plastics (BPA, phthalates): Leach from packaging, bottles, and receipts; mimic estrogen and promote fat cell formation.
- PFAS (“forever chemicals”): In non-stick cookware, waterproof clothing, and contaminated water; linked to lower metabolism and higher weight.
- Pesticides and pollutants: Accumulate in the food chain and disrupt thyroid function and mitochondrial energy use.
- Some fragrances and preservatives are obesogenic.

6. Obesogenic Medications

Many commonly prescribed drugs cause significant weight gain.

- Antidepressants (e.g., mirtazapine, paroxetine)
- Antipsychotics (e.g., olanzapine, clozapine)
- Corticosteroids (e.g., prednisone)
- Beta-blockers, some anticonvulsants, and insulin-sensitizing drugs in certain contexts These alter appetite, slow metabolism, or promote fat storage—often creating a vicious cycle with obesity-related conditions.
- Antibiotics alter the gut microbiome

7. Social and Cultural Norms

Society has normalized behaviors that drive weight gain.

- Food as entertainment and emotional regulation: Celebrations, stress relief, and boredom are routinely paired with eating.
- “Busy = successful.” Overpacked schedules leave little time for cooking, exercise, or sleep.

- Stigma paradox: While obesity is judged harshly, the behaviors that cause it (snacking, screen time, convenience foods) are socially rewarded.

8. Reduced Thermogenic Exposure

Modern comfort eliminates natural calorie-burning stressors.

- Climate controlled environments: Homes, cars, offices, schools, etc.
- Constant indoor temperatures (68–72°F) minimize brown fat activation and adaptive thermogenesis.

These forces do not act in isolation—they compound. An ultra-processed meal eaten late at night in front of a screen, packaged in plastic, after a stressful sedentary day, delivers a multi-layered obesogenic hit.

The crucial insight: None of these forces are under individual control in a passive life. To achieve and maintain healthy body composition, you must actively identify and counteract them. This means living quite differently from cultural defaults. Sustained success requires education, deliberate environmental redesign, and lifelong dedication.

The modern world is not neutral on weight—it is actively pushing against leanness. Recognizing these forces is the first step toward reclaiming control.

Recreational Eating

Recreational eating refers to consuming food for pleasure or entertainment rather than for nutritional needs or hunger. This behavior has become a significant driver of the obesity epidemic in modern societies, where food is often tied to social activities, leisure, and emotional gratification. For instance, activities like movie nights with popcorn, game days with snacks, or casual outings to dessert shops, encourage frequent overconsumption of calorie-dense, nutrient-poor foods such as chips, candies, and sodas.

These items are engineered to be hyper-palatable through high levels of sugar, fat, and salt, triggering reward centers in the brain similar to addictive substances. Over time, this leads to habitual calorie surpluses, promoting weight gain and fat accumulation. Studies highlight how the normalization of recreational eating in cultures with abundant food options has correlated with rising obesity rates, particularly in urban areas where such indulgences are marketed aggressively through advertising and social media.

Eating from Boredom

Eating from boredom occurs when individuals turn to food as a way to fill time or alleviate monotony, rather than responding to actual physiological hunger. This emotional eating pattern contributes heavily to the obesity epidemic by fostering unnecessary calorie intake in sedentary lifestyles. In environments where people spend extended periods at desks, watching screens, or in low-stimulation settings—like during remote work or downtime at home—snacking becomes a default distraction.

Common choices include easy-to-grab items like cookies, crisps, or ice cream, which provide a quick dopamine hit but add empty calories without satiety. Boredom eating disrupts natural hunger cues, leading to overeating and impaired self-regulation. This is exacerbated in younger demographics exposed to constant digital stimuli, where boredom strikes more frequently, resulting in cumulative weight gain over months and years. As a result, populations with high rates of sedentary behavior, such as office workers or students, see amplified obesity risks, turning what could be productive or active breaks into calorie-loading sessions.

When bored, eating is one of the worst things you can do.

Eating Due to High Availability

High availability of food means that calorie-rich options are omnipresent and easily accessible, often at low cost or even free. This fuels the obesity epidemic by encouraging impulsive and excessive consumption. In developed countries, supermarkets, vending machines, fast-food chains, and delivery apps ensure that high-calorie foods—like processed snacks, sugary drinks, and oversized portions—are available 24/7, removing barriers to eating beyond need.

This high-availability obesogenic environment promotes passive overeating. For example, office pantries stocked with free treats or convenience stores on every corner tempt frequent, unplanned intakes. Economic factors play a role too, with junk food often cheaper and more shelf-stable than healthier alternatives, making it the default choice for busy or lower-income individuals. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows that regions with dense food retail outlets experience higher obesity prevalence, as constant exposure overrides willpower and normalizes large portions. This accessibility erodes portion control and mindful eating habits, leading to widespread energy imbalances and the steady rise in overweight populations globally.