

**Working Papers
Project on the Public and Biological Security
Harvard School of Public Health**

18.

OBESITY SURVEY

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Despite Conflicting Studies about Obesity, Most Americans Think the Problem Remains Serious

Boston, MA -- The past year has seen scientific studies that have varied in their estimates of the seriousness of obesity and overweight and their impact on premature death.[1] A new opinion poll by the Harvard School of Public Health finds that most Americans have not changed their minds about the seriousness of the obesity problem and do not believe that scientific experts are overestimating the health risks of obesity. In addition, they are no less likely than a year ago to be keeping track of calories, fat content, or the amount of carbohydrates they eat.

Three-fourths of Americans rate obesity as an "extremely"(34%) or "very"(41%) serious public health problem in the United States. In addition, the majority of Americans believe that scientific experts have been portraying accurately (58%) or even underestimating (22%) the health risks of being obese. Very few Americans reported believing that the health risks were being overestimated by scientific experts (15%).

"Even after all the criticism that too much attention is being paid to obesity, Americans still see this as a very serious problem for the country," said Robert J. Blendon, Professor of Health Policy and Political Analysis at the Harvard School of Public Health.

Counting calories, carbohydrates, and fats

The poll also finds approximately the same number of Americans in 2005 as in 2004 reporting that they are keeping track of the amount of calories (32% 2005, 35% 2004), fat content (47%, 46%) and the amount of carbohydrates (36%, 36%) in their daily diet. In addition, the survey finds a small increase in the number of Americans who report that they are seriously trying to lose weight from 27% in 2004 to 32% in 2005. This includes more than half (54%) of people who consider themselves to be overweight.

Obesity and Mortality

A number of issues were raised by recent studies about obesity including whether more Americans die each year from the effects of obesity than from the effects of smoking and tobacco, and whether people who are moderately overweight are more likely to die prematurely or develop a serious chronic illness than those who are at the recommended weight. Forty-one percent of Americans reported believing that the same number of people in the US die from the effects of being seriously overweight as from the effects of smoking and tobacco. In addition, half of the public (51%) thought that someone who is moderately overweight would be more likely than someone who is the recommended weight to die prematurely. However, 73% thought that a moderately overweight person would be more likely than someone at the recommended weight to develop a chronic illness such as diabetes or high blood pressure.

"Americans are pretty certain that being moderately overweight leads to serious health problems," said Blendon, "but they are not convinced that it leads to premature death."

Trust in scientific experts

The survey finds that trust in scientific experts on the issue of obesity is mixed. Only 48% of Americans reported having a "great deal" (14%) or a "good amount" (34%) of trust in the advice scientific experts give people about how to control their weight. However, 61% of Americans said they paid a lot (13%) or a fair amount (48%) of attention to the nutritional recommendations from scientific experts about how to control their weight.

Few Americans (36%) reported that they had read or seen any news stories about the recent differences in scientific findings around whether people who are moderately overweight are no more likely to die prematurely than people who are at the recommended weight. Approximately one-half (52%) of those who read or saw any news stories about the differences in scientific findings said that these stories would make no difference in the likelihood that they would pay attention in the future to advice from scientific experts

on how to control their weight; only 11% said these stories would make them less likely to pay attention.

The 2004 trend data come from an ABC News/*Time* poll, May 10-16, 2004.

Methodology

This poll was designed and analyzed by researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health. The work was supported through a grant from the CDC to provide technical assistance by monitoring the response of the general public to health threats. The project director is Robert J. Blendon of the Harvard School of Public Health. The research team also includes Catherine M. DesRoches, John M. Benson, Kathleen Weldon, and Chantal Fleischfresser of the Harvard School of Public Health and Melissa J. Herrmann of ICR/International Communications Research. Fieldwork was conducted via telephone by ICR/International Communications Research of Media (PA) between June 23 -28, 2005. The survey was conducted with a nationally representative sample of 2,033 adults age 18 and over. The margin of error for this poll was 2.2%.

Possible sources of nonsampling error include nonresponse bias, as well as question wording and ordering effects. Nonresponse in telephone surveys produces some known biases in survey-derived estimates because participation tends to vary for different subgroups of the population. To compensate for these known biases, sample data are weighted to the most recent Census data available from the Current Population Survey for gender, age, race, education, as well as number of adults and number of telephone lines in the household. Other techniques, including random-digit dialing, replicate subsamples, callbacks staggered over times of day and days of the week, and systematic respondent selection within households, are used to ensure that the sample is representative.

[1] See Flegal KM, Graubard BI, Williamson DF, Gail MH. Excess deaths associated with underweight, overweight, and obesity. *JAMA*. 2005; 293: 1861-1867; Gregg EW, Cheng YJ, Cadwell BL, et al. Secular trends in cardiovascular disease risk factors according to body mass index in US adults. *JAMA*. 2005; 293: 1868-1874; Mokdad AH, Marks JS, Stroup DR, Gerberding JL. Actual causes of death in the United States, 2000. *JAMA*. 2004; 291: 1238-1245.

Americans' concerns about obesity

Percent reporting that obesity is an extremely/very serious public health problem

2005

75%

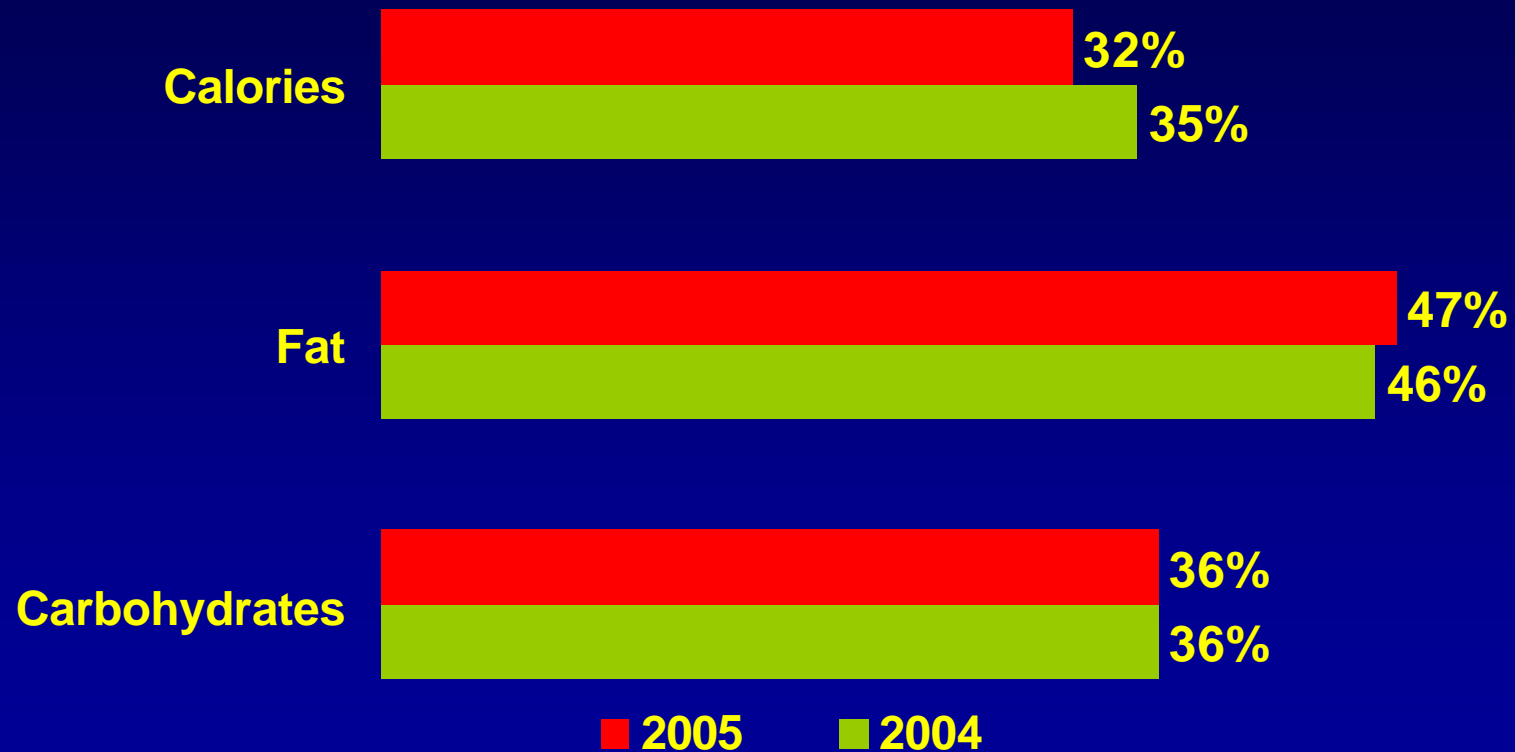
2004

80%

ABC News/*Time*, Obesity Poll, May 2004.

Harvard School of Public Health, Obesity Poll, June 2005.

Percent who say they track the following in their diet

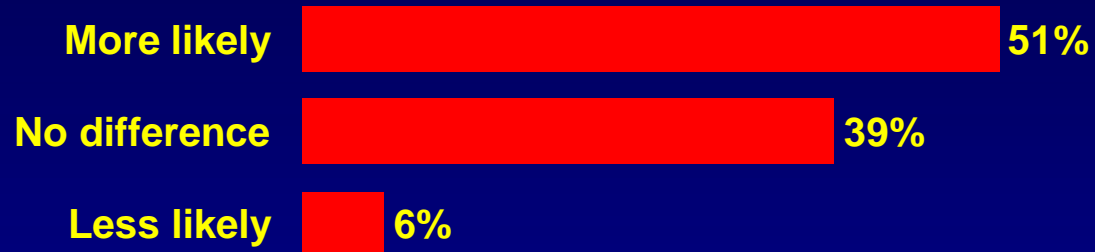


ABC News/*Time*, Obesity Poll, May 2004.

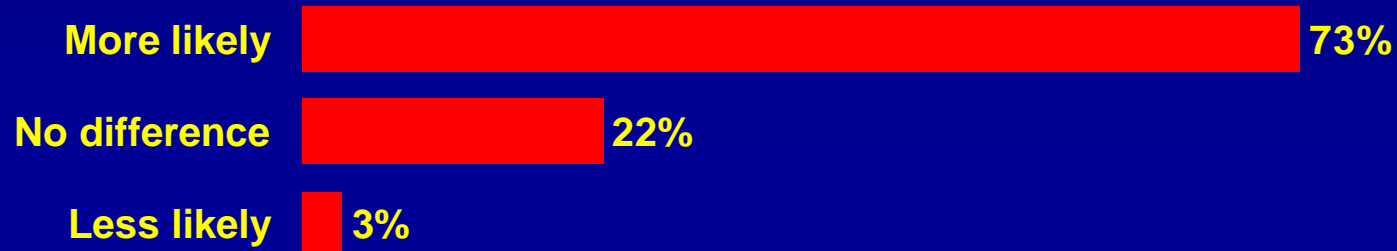
Harvard School of Public Health, Obesity Poll, June 2005.

Beliefs about the health effects of being moderately overweight

Is someone who is moderately overweight more or less likely to die prematurely than someone at the recommended weight?



Is someone who is moderately overweight more or less likely to develop a serious chronic condition than someone at the recommended weight?



Note: "Don't know" responses not shown

Harvard School of Public Health, Obesity Poll, June 2005.

HARVARD SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH
OBESITY POLL

Topline Results

The Harvard School of Public Health Obesity Poll was conducted by telephone from June 23-28, 2005, among a nationally representative sample of 2,033 adults age 18 and older. Margin of error for total respondents is +/- 2.2 percentage points. All fieldwork by ICR/International Communications Research of Media, PA.

OB-1. For each item I name, please tell me how serious a public health problem you think it is in this country—extremely serious, very serious, somewhat serious, or less serious than that. Is (INSERT ITEM) extremely serious, very serious, somewhat serious, or less serious than that?

a. Heart disease

	EXTREMELY/VERY SERIOUS			SOMEWHAT/LESS SERIOUS			Don't know	Refused
	NET	Extremely	Very	NET	Somewhat	Less		
6/28/05	80	36	44	19	16	3	1	*
5/16/04	82	29	53	17	15	2	1	--

b. Cancer

	EXTREMELY/VERY SERIOUS			SOMEWHAT/LESS SERIOUS			Don't know	Refused
	NET	Extremely	Very	NET	Somewhat	Less		
6/28/05	88	46	42	11	10	1	*	*
5/16/04	86	37	49	13	12	1	*	--

c. AIDS

	EXTREMELY/VERY SERIOUS			SOMEWHAT/LESS SERIOUS			Don't know	Refused
	NET	Extremely	Very	NET	Somewhat	Less		
6/28/05	80	44	37	18	15	3	2	*
5/16/04	79	35	44	20	16	4	1	--

d. Cigarette smoking

	EXTREMELY/VERY SERIOUS			SOMEWHAT/LESS SERIOUS			Don't know	Refused
	NET	Extremely	Very	NET	Somewhat	Less		
6/28/05	70	33	37	29	22	7	1	*
5/16/04	72	32	40	28	22	6	*	--

Trend reported is from The ABC/Time Obesity Poll that ran May 10-16, 2004

** Represents an answer less than one percent*

e. Illegal drug abuse

	EXTREMELY/VERY SERIOUS			SOMEWHAT/LESS SERIOUS			Don't know	Refused
	NET	Extremely	Very	NET	Somewhat	Less		
6/28/05	82	44	38	17	14	2	2	*
5/16/04	76	32	44	24	20	4	*	--

f. Alcohol abuse

	EXTREMELY/VERY SERIOUS			SOMEWHAT/LESS SERIOUS			Don't know	Refused
	NET	Extremely	Very	NET	Somewhat	Less		
6/28/05	71	30	41	28	24	3	1	*
5/16/04	67	25	42	32	27	5	1	--

g. Obesity, that is, people being seriously overweight

	EXTREMELY/VERY SERIOUS			SOMEWHAT/LESS SERIOUS			Don't know	Refused
	NET	Extremely	Very	NET	Somewhat	Less		
6/28/05	75	34	41	25	20	4	*	*
5/16/04	80	34	46	21	18	3	*	--

h. Childhood obesity in particular

	EXTREMELY/VERY SERIOUS			SOMEWHAT/LESS SERIOUS			Don't know	Refused
	NET	Extremely	Very	NET	Somewhat	Less		
6/28/05	74	35	39	25	21	4	1	*
5/16/04	77	33	44	22	19	3	1	--

OB-2. To the best of your knowledge, how many cups of fruits and vegetables do nutrition experts say most people should eat each day?

	1 or fewer	2-3	4-5	6-7	8 or more	Don't know	Refused
6/28/05	3	31	42	13	8	3	*

OB-3. To the best of your knowledge, do more people in this country die from the effects of smoking and tobacco, or from the effects of obesity, that is, people being seriously overweight, or do about the same number of people die from each?

	More people die from smoking and tobacco	More people die from obesity	Same number of people die from each	Don't know	Refused
6/28/05	35	19	41	5	*

OB-4. I'm going to read you a list of things that people can do to maintain a healthy weight. Please tell me how important each of the following is in maintaining a healthy weight. How about (INSERT NEXT ITEM)? Would you say this is extremely important, very important, somewhat important, not very important, or not important at all?

a. Increasing your physical activity level

	IMPORTANT			NOT IMPORTANT				Don't know	Refused
	NET	Extremely	Very	NET	Somewhat	Not very	Not at all		
6/28/05	94	52	42	6	5	*	*	*	*

b. Increasing the amount of fruits and vegetables you eat

	IMPORTANT			NOT IMPORTANT				Don't know	Refused
	NET	Extremely	Very	NET	Somewhat	Not very	Not at all		
6/28/05	78	30	49	21	19	2	*	*	*

c. Controlling the size of the portions you eat?

	IMPORTANT			NOT IMPORTANT				Don't know	Refused
	NET	Extremely	Very	NET	Somewhat	Not very	Not at all		
6/28/05	82	38	44	17	15	2	1	*	*

OB-5. Do you think that someone who is moderately overweight is more likely or less likely than someone who is the recommended weight to die prematurely, or isn't there much difference?

	More likely	Less likely	Isn't much difference	Don't know	Refused
6/28/05	51	6	39	4	*

OB-6. Do you think that someone who is moderately overweight is more likely or less likely than someone who is the recommended weight to develop a chronic illness such as diabetes or high blood pressure, or isn't there much difference?

	More likely	Less likely	Isn't much difference	Don't know	Refused
6/28/05	73	3	22	2	*

OB-7. Do you think the health risks of being obese have been overestimated by scientific experts, underestimated, or portrayed accurately?

	Overestimated	Underestimated	Portrayed accurately	Don't know	Refused
6/28/05	15	22	58	4	*

OB-8. Do you find the time to get any moderate to vigorous physical exercise in an average week, or not? That means exercise that increases heart rate and breathing.

	Yes, find the time	No, do not find the time	Don't know	Refused
6/28/05	77	22	1	*
5/16/04	77	22	*	--

OB-9. Do you feel that you probably get as much physical exercise as you should, or do you feel you should probably be getting more physical exercise?

	Yes, get as much as you should	No, should be getting more	Don't know	Refused
6/28/05	34	66	*	*
5/16/04	29	71	*	--

OB-10. Do you try to keep track of the (INSERT ITEM) in your daily diet, or is that something you don't pay enough attention to?

(Asked of those that keep track of (ITEM) in their daily diet)

OB-11. Is that something you track closely, or somewhat?

OB-10a/OB-11a Combination Table

a. Amount of calories

	TRACK AMOUNT OF CALORIES			Do no pay attention	Don't know	Refused
	NET	Closely	Not closely			
6/28/05	32	14	18	68	*	*
5/16/04	35	12	23	65	*	--

OB-10b/OB-11b Combination Table

b. Fat content

	TRACK FAT CONTENT			Do no pay attention	Don't know	Refused
	NET	Closely	Not closely			
6/28/05	47	22	25	52	*	*
5/16/04	46	19	27	54	--	--

OB-10c/OB-11c Combination Table

c. Amount of carbohydrates

	TRACK AMOUNT OF CARBOHYDRATES			Do no pay attention	Don't know	Refused
	NET	Closely	Not closely			
6/28/05	36	16	21	63	*	*
5/16/04	36	15	21	65	--	--

OB-10d/OB-11d Combination Table

d. Number of serving of fruits and vegetables

	TRACK # SERVINGS/FRUITS & VEGETABLES			Do no pay attention	Don't know	Refused
	NET	Closely	Not closely			
6/28/05	45	21	24	55	*	*

OB-12. Do you feel that you eat as many fruits and vegetables as you should, or do you feel you should probably be eating more of them?

	Eat as many as you should	Should probably be eating more	Don't know	Refused
6/28/05	33	66	1	*

OB-13. Next, I will read you a list of federal government agencies. Please say for each if you understand what it is and does, or not. Do you know what (INSERT) does?

a. The Food and Drug Administration, or FDA

	Yes	No	Don't know	Refused
6/28/05	84	16	*	*

b. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or CDC

	Yes	No	Don't know	Refused
6/28/05	74	26	*	*

c. The National Institutes of Health, or NIH

	Yes	No	Don't know	Refused
6/28/05	44	55	1	*

d. The US Department of Agriculture, or USDA

	Yes	No	Don't know	Refused
6/28/05	78	21	*	*

(Asked of those who know what (ITEM) does)

OB-14. Overall, how well would you rate the job (INSERT ITEM) does—excellent, pretty good, only fair, or poor?

a. The Food and Drug Administration, or FDA

	N=	EXCELLENT/PRETTY GOOD			ONLY FAIR/POOR			Don't know	Refused
		NET	Excellent	Pretty good	NET	Only fair	Poor		
6/28/05	1785	59	9	49	38	27	11	3	*

b. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or CDC

	N=	EXCELLENT/PRETTY GOOD			ONLY FAIR/POOR			Don't know	Refused
		NET	Excellent	Pretty good	NET	Only fair	Poor		
6/28/05	1562	76	20	56	20	16	4	4	--

c. The National Institutes of Health, or NIH

	N=	EXCELLENT/PRETTY GOOD			ONLY FAIR/POOR			Don't know	Refused
		NET	Excellent	Pretty good	NET	Only fair	Poor		
6/28/05	945	68	15	53	27	23	4	5	--

d. The US Department of Agriculture, or USDA

	N=	EXCELLENT/PRETTY GOOD			ONLY FAIR/POOR			Don't know	Refused
		NET	Excellent	Pretty good	NET	Only fair	Poor		
6/28/05	1665	69	11	58	27	23	4	4	--

(Asked of those who know what (ITEM) does)

OB-15. To the best of your knowledge, how active is each of the following government agencies in conducting research on obesity related health problems. Is (INSERT) very active, somewhat active, not very active, or not active at all? If you don't know enough to say, please tell me.

Total Respondent Tables

a. The Food and Drug Administration, or FDA

	ACTIVE			NOT ACTIVE			Don't know	Refused	Not asked— Does not know the FDA
	NET	Very	Somewhat	NET	Not very	Not at all			
6/28/05	58	19	39	12	7	5	14	*	16

b. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or CDC

	ACTIVE			NOT ACTIVE			Don't know	Refused	Not asked— Does not know the CDC
	NET	Very	Somewhat	NET	Not very	Not at all			
6/28/05	52	21	31	10	5	5	12	--	26

c. The National Institutes of Health, or NIH

	ACTIVE			NOT ACTIVE			Don't know	Refused	Not asked-- Does not know the NIH
	NET	Very	Somewhat	NET	Not very	Not at all			
6/28/05	36	17	20	2	1	1	5	--	56

d. The US Department of Agriculture, or USDA

	ACTIVE			NOT ACTIVE			Don't know	Refused	Not asked-- Does not know the USDA
	NET	Very	Somewhat	NET	Not very	Not at all			
6/28/05	47	11	36	15	8	7	16	*	22

OB-16. How much do you trust the advice scientific experts give people about how to control their weight—a great deal, a good amount, only some, or very little?

	GREAT DEAL/GOOD AMOUNT			SOME/VERY LITTLE			Don't know	Refused
	NET	Great deal	Good amount	NET	Only some	Very little		
6/28/05	48	14	34	50	36	14	2	*

OB-17. How much attention do you pay to the nutritional recommendations from scientific experts about how to control your weight that you hear or read about? Do you pay a lot of attention, a fair amount, not too much, or none at all?

	A LOT/FAIR AMOUNT			NOT TOO MUCH/NONE			Don't know	Refused
	NET	A lot	Fair	NET	Not too	None		
6/28/05	61	13	48	39	28	10	1	*

OB-18. Did you happen to read or see any news stories about the recent differences in scientific findings around whether people who are moderately overweight are less likely to die prematurely than people who are at the recommended weight, or didn't you see or read any news stories about this?

	Yes	No	Don't know	Refused
6/28/05	36	62	2	*

(Asked of those who have read or seen new stories about the recent differences in scientific findings around whether people who are moderately overweight are less likely to die prematurely; n=803)

OB-19. To the best of your knowledge, who conducted these studies? Was it (CDC scientists), (university scientists), (scientists working for the food industry), or are you not sure who conducted them?

	CDC Scientists	University Scientists	Scientists who work for the food industry	Not sure	Refused
6/28/05	6	21	7	66	1

OB-18/OB-19 Combo Table

Base = Total Respondents

	6/28/05
Have seen recent news stories	36
Studies were conducted by CDC Scientists	2
Studies were conducted by University scientists	7
Studies were conducted by scientists who work for the food industry	3
Not sure who conducted the studies	24
Have not seen recent news stories	62
Don't know	2
Refused	*

(Asked of those who have read or seen new stories about the recent differences in scientific findings around whether people who are moderately overweight are less likely to die prematurely; n=803)

OB-20. Did the story about these different scientific findings make you more likely to pay attention to the advice that scientific experts give you about your weight, less likely to pay attention, or did it not make a difference?

	More Likely	Less Likely	Did not make a difference	Not sure	Refused
6/28/05	35	11	52	1	*

OB-18/OB-20 Combo Table

Base = Total Respondents

	6/28/05
Have seen recent news stories	36
More likely to pay attention to advice of experts	13
Less likely to pay attention to advice of experts	4
Did not make a difference	19
Have not seen recent news stories	62
Don't know	2
Refused	*

(Asked of those who understand what The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or CDC does; n=1562)

OB-21. When it comes specifically to information about obesity, that is, people being seriously overweight, how much do you trust the Centers for Disease Control, or CDC, as a reliable source of information?

	Great deal	Good amount	Only some	Very little	Don't know	Refused
6/28/05	19	37	28	12	4	*

OB-22. Do you favor government spending more, less, or about the same amount on public education campaigns to promote healthy eating and physical activity and reduce obesity?

	Favor more	Favor less	About the same	Don't know	Refused
6/28/05	44	17	36	3	*

OB-23. Would you be willing to pay more in taxes to support government funded public education campaigns to promote healthy eating and physical activity and reduce obesity?

	Yes, willing to pay more	No, not willing to pay more	Don't know	Refused
6/28/05	41	56	3	*

SELF-REPORTED

OB-24. How would you describe your own personal weight situation now—very overweight, somewhat overweight, about right, somewhat underweight, or very underweight?

	6/28/05	5/16/04
Overweight (net)	41	40
Very overweight	5	5
Somewhat overweight	36	35
About right	53	54
Underweight(net)	6	6
Somewhat underweight	5	5
Very underweight	1	1
Don't know	*	*
Refused	*	--

OB-25. In feet and inches, what is your height without shoes on?

	Under 4 feet	4 but less than 5	5 but less than 6	6 feet or taller	Don't know	Refused
6/28/05	*	2	80	15	1	2

OB-26. Please tell me your present weight.

	Less than 125	125 but less than 150	150 but less than 175	175 but less than 200	200 but less than 225	225 but less than 250	250 or more	Don't know	Refused
6/28/05	9	21	24	19	11	5	5	2	5

OB-25/OB-26 Adult Body Mass Index: Calculated from self-reported height and weight
Base = Total Respondents

	Underweight <18.5	Normal 18.5 to <25	Overweight 25 to <30	Obese 30+	Unspecified
6/28/05	2	37	33	21	7

OB-27. At this time are you seriously trying to lose weight, or not?

	Yes	No	Don't know	Refused
6/28/05	32	67	*	1
5/16/04	27	73	*	--