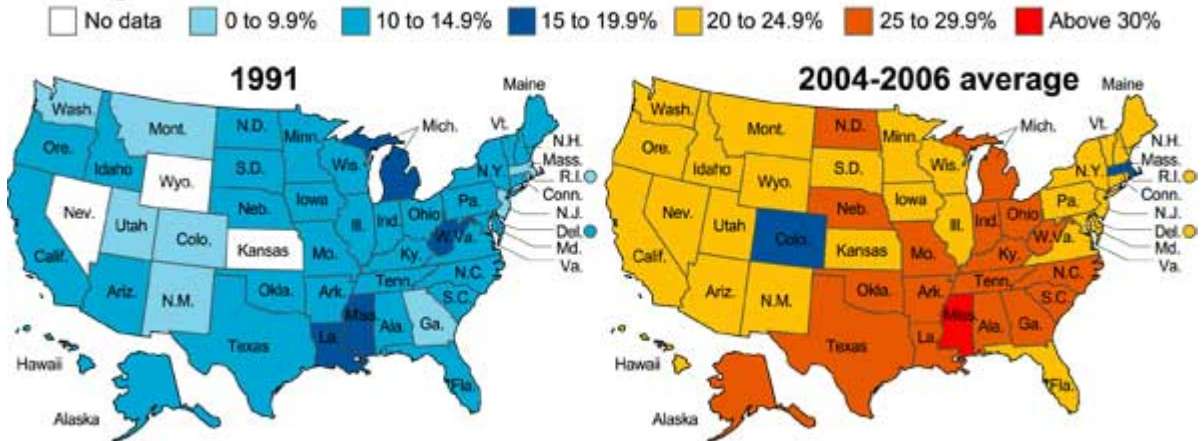


Obesity Rates Climb in Most States

Obesity rates for American adults have risen between 10% and 15% in most states in just 15 years.

Percentage of adults who are obese¹



1 – Body mass index above 30 or about 30 pounds overweight for a 5'4" adult:
Source: Trust for America's Health; HealthyAmericans.org; CDC

By Dave Merrill, USA TODAY

(USA Today) — Loosen the belt buckle another notch America: Obesity rates continued their climb in 31 states last year. No state showed a decline.

Mississippi became the first state to crack the 30% barrier for adult residents considered to be obese. West Virginia and Alabama are just slightly behind, according to the Trust for America's Health, a research group that focuses on disease prevention.

Colorado continued its reign as the leanest state in the nation with an obesity rate projected at 17.6%.

This year's report, for the first time, looked at obesity rates among children ages 10 to 17. The District of Columbia had the highest percentage — 22.8%. Utah had the lowest percentage of obese youth — 8.5%.

Officials at the Trust for America's Health advocate for the government to play a larger role in preventing obesity. People who are overweight are at an increased risk for diabetes, heart problems and other chronic diseases that contribute to greater health care costs.



Unidentified pedestrians walk across the street in a popular retail section of Providence, R.I., Monday.

Residents in Rhode Island tend to walk more and depend less on their cars. Rhode Island was among the bottom six states in adult obesity.

"It's one of those issues where everyone believes this is an epidemic, but it's not getting the level of political and policymaker attention that it ought to," said Jeffrey Levi, the organization's executive director. "As every candidate for president talks about health care reform and controlling health care cost costs, if we don't hone in on this issue, none of their proposals are going to be affordable."

At the same time, many believe weight is a personal choice and responsibility. Levi doesn't dispute that notion, but he said society can help people make good choices.

■ OBESITY RANKINGS

MORE POUNDS: Obesity rates climbed in 31 states last year, and no state showed a decline.

WHERE: Mississippi became the first state to crack the 30% barrier for adults considered to be obese. West Virginia and Alabama were just behind.

PUBLIC CRISIS: Health officials say the latest state rankings provide evidence that the nation has a public health crisis on its hands.

Source: Associated Press

"If we want kids to eat healthier food, we have to invest the money for school nutrition programs so that school lunches are healthier," he said. "If we want people to be more physically active, then there have to be safe places to be active. That's not just a class issues. We've designed suburban communities where there are no sidewalks for anybody to go out and take a walk."

To measure obesity rates, Trust for America's Health compares data from 2003-2005 with 2004-2006. It combines data from three years to improve the accuracy of projections. The data come from a survey of height and

weight taken over the telephone by state health departments.

Generally, anyone with a body mass index greater than 30 is considered obese. The index is a ratio that takes into account height and weight. The overweight range is 25 to 29.9. Normal is 18.5 to 24.9. People with a large amount of lean muscle mass, such as athletes, can show a large body mass index without having an unhealthy level of fat.

A lack of exercise is a huge factor in obesity rates. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found last year that more than 22% of Americans did not engage in any physical activity in the past month. The percentage is greater than 30% in four states: Mississippi, Louisiana, Kentucky and Tennessee.

Meanwhile, Minnesotans led the way when it came to exercise. An estimated 15.4% of the state's residents did not engage in any physical exercise — the best rate in the nation. Still, the state ranked 28th overall when it came to the percentage of obese adults.

Another factor in obesity rates is poverty. The five poorest states were all in the top 10 when it came to obesity rates. An exception to that rule was the District of Columbia and New Mexico. Both had high poverty rates, but also one of the better obesity rates among adults.