[The Modern World Causes Obesity](#)

Scientists, doctors, dietitians, and amateurs of all stripes have suggested many factors that may lead to obesity and that have lead to the obesity epidemic. But what are the odds that all of these factors just happened to change in the same direction, towards causing more obesity, at the same time? The odds are astronomically low, which leads one to the conclusion that the modern world causes obesity.

Factors involved in obesity

[In our last article](#), we saw that, while processed and high-carbohydrate foods are associated with obesity, that has not always been the case. Americans used to eat plenty of obesogenic food, but didn't become obese.

Let's take a look at some of the factors that have been plausibly suggested to lead to obesity. Many of these have scientific backing of some form or another, either animal or human experiments, or epidemiological evidence.

 1. Sleep
 2. Light
 3. Medications
 4. Sugar
 5. Refined carbohydrates
 6. Vegetable (seed) oils
 7. Less physical activity or exercise
 8. Decline of tobacco use
 9. Low-fat food
10. Less protein
11. Large portion sizes
12. Sugar-sweetened beverages
13. Constant food availability, snacks
14. Cheap food and greater wealth

15. Environmental endocrine disruptors
16. Changing social norms
17. Hyper-palatable processed food
18. Food fortification with iron and folate
19. Microorganisms
20. Increasing maternal age
21. Epigenetics
22. Heating and air conditioning

In my opinion, many or most of these are valid causes of the obesity epidemic. There's just too much evidence for many of them. I've probably missed a few too.

For the sake of argument, assume that the above is a comprehensive list of the causes of obesity, or of the obesity epidemic, and that each one of them contributes some fraction to the effect. What are the odds that each of these factors changed, and all in the same direction — towards causing more people to gain fat — all at the same time?

If the odds were 50/50 that a factor could go one way or another (as in a coin toss), the odds of all 22 factors going in the same direction are 1 in 4.194 million. (Calculator here.) I could probably use some help on these statistical assumptions from Nassim Taleb. But we'll just go with these.

Something caused all factors to move in the same direction. Even though a lot of assumptions are embedded in that calculation, our ballpark estimate shows that the odds of this being due to chance are low.

What is that *something* that changed all of those factors?

The modern world.

The modern world and obesity

The key difference between the so-called developed countries and the underdeveloped countries is that the former are more modern. They're wealthier, and the average person in a developed country doesn't need to work as hard or struggle as much for a given level of wealth. In short, life is easier.

Life is easier because our wealth allows us to isolate ourselves from nature.

- We don't have to stop activity at dusk, because we have electric lights, as well as televisions and computers.
- We don't need to walk; we have cars.
- We don't let our bodies heal themselves; we have drugs for almost everything.
- We don't need to eat bland food; we have sugar.

The list goes on, but the idea is that living closer to nature imposes limits on us. And we had to work hard and endure much in trying to overcome those limits.

For a long time, hundreds of thousands or millions of years (depending how you define "human"), we've lived much closer to nature. Suddenly, we are not.

Our biological and social inputs are more artificial, controlled by ourselves.

We were shaped by evolution to be adapted to the older, more natural world. Our genes are not adapted to the modern world.

That's why we have an obesity epidemic. Many environmental factors have changed, and some are sure to be more important to obesity than others, like 24/7 availability of cheap, processed food. But the modern world changed these factors in the direction of causing obesity, and at about the same time.

We're insulated from stresses. We never go hungry and physical activity levels are low.

We're not forced to conform to natural rhythms, so we don't sleep as much or as well. We insulate ourselves from heat and cold much more than before.

We don't force our bodies to deal with adversity, we take drugs.

We eat highly artificial foods. Children don't play in the dirt.

We need the stresses and the rhythms of nature to be lean and healthy.

Control your environment

When I discussed the [Deep Soy State](), I pointed out the myriad ways in which our environment conspires to make us fat and unhealthy.

The points outlined above show the same.

If you want to be lean and healthy, or to become so, you must control your environment to the extent possible.

You must seek out normal stressors like hunger and exercise. Virtually all discussion of health, fitness, and obesity focuses on diet and exercise, and indeed they're very important. But you also have to pay attention to all the other factors in your environment.

For example:

- determine whether you need the medications you take, or whether they may be doing more harm than good;
- use a light filter or app that dims electronic devices at night, so you can sleep better;
- go hungry for 16 to 20 (or more) hours a few times a week;
- lift weights, do some sprints;
- don't consume foods or beverages radically different from anything found in nature — pizza and soda qualify here; eat meat and eggs and vegetables, like humans are meant to;

- take a cold shower and learn what actual cold feels like;
- walk, preferably among the trees and nature, not on a treadmill.

All of these are a few ways of changing your environment to be more in tune with a natural environment. They involve discomfort and suppression of impulses. Hopefully we can use the modern world to get the best of nature — more trees and fewer infectious diseases, for example.

You're going to have to avoid many features of our modern environment too. The shortest rule of thumb here is: whatever you see unhealthy and/or obese people doing — don't do those things. For example;

- Don't shop in the middle aisles of the supermarket.
- Don't eat at fast food restaurants.
- Don't watch television.
- Don't eat every few hours.
- Don't be sedentary.

Conclusion

Food and physical activity are obviously important for staying lean and healthy. But there are many other factors. Our ancestors didn't always eat right, but for the most part they didn't get fat.

That's because they didn't live in the modern world, and they weren't comfortable and coddled at all times, like us.

Be aware that the modern world has changed a multitude of factors that are important to health. That's why we got the obesity epidemic.

PS: One way to get and stay lean is by adding muscle. See my book, [Muscle Up](#).
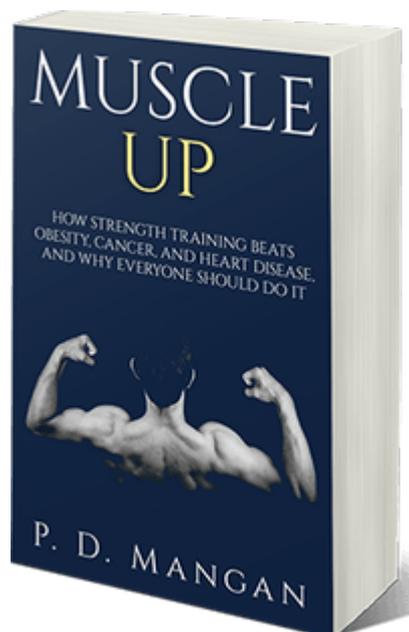
PPS: **[Check out my Supplements Buying Guide for Men.](#)**