



Science & Society

Too big for our Own Britches?

A few years ago New York City ordered new subway cars, and officials asked riders to comment on the comfort of the old cars' seats. To their surprise, the biggest complaint was that the spaces for individual bottoms were just 17.5 inches wide. The officials listened. The new cars have "bench" seats without dividers, and now there's plenty of room for even the largest bottoms — if you can find a seat.

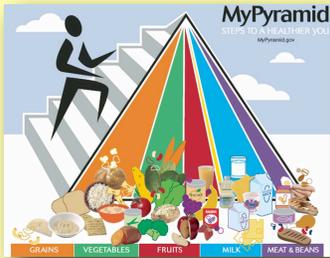


Companies that make seats for sports arenas report the same trend. When the NBA's Indiana Pacers replaced an arena where every seat was 18 inches wide, they ordered 17,500 seats for their new home — and the *smallest* ones were 21 inches wide. Chair designers like to talk about how "comfortable" the new seats are, but the reality is simpler. Americans are getting fatter.



In fact, more than a third of Americans are now obese (more than 20% over healthy body weight). Even more worrisome, the percentage of young people aged 12-17 who are obese has more than tripled (from 5% to 17.4%) in the last 25 years. As these young people, your generation, gets older, their obesity-related health risks from heart disease, stroke, diabetes will become increasingly serious.

Who's to blame? What's to be done?



Clearly, an American lifestyle of fast foods, little exercise, and the use of cars for even the shortest trips has had its effect. The increasing American waistline is nothing less than a failure of homeostasis that affects our whole society. The problem, however, is personal, and the solutions are individual. They begin with healthier patterns of food and exercise. The US Department of Agriculture has put these recommendations in the form of a pyramid that shows how food and exercise should be related. The key to weight control is to go easy on fatty foods and emphasize plenty of whole grains, vegetables, and fruits. If you lead an active life, with lots of exercise every day, the amount of food you need increases, and that's why the pyramid shows each type of food as an expanding wedge rather than a fixed amount. In short, if more of us sitting in those ever-wider seats emulated the active lifestyles of the athletes we like to watch, we'd be the healthier for it — to say nothing of being able to pack a few more seats on the subway car.

• Visit the **millerandlevine** web page for **Chapter 38** (Nutrition) for more information•