

Fit or fat? Covered-dish dinners take toll on Baptists' health

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Baylor University students enjoy a game of intramural flag football.
(Photo by Chris Hansen/Baylor University)

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By Hannah Elliott

Associated Baptist Press

WEST LAFAYETTE, Ind. (ABP)—Of all believers, Baptists are the most likely to be obese, a [new study from Purdue University](#) has revealed.

But then, obese people tend to live in states heavily populated by religious people—particularly Baptists.

So, why are Baptists fatter?

Some experts have suggested Baptists substitute gluttony for other vices.



Students at Baylor University work out lifting weights.

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Ken Ferraro, the Purdue professor of sociology who led the eight-year study, said the trend could have resulted from a "strong emphasis for Baptists to avoid alcohol and tobacco and, as a result, indulge in overeating instead."

While many conservative denominations abstain from dancing, smoking cigarettes or drinking alcohol, they have no guidelines when it comes to

overindulging in food.

Apparently, that attitude has taken its toll. Obesity cases increased from 24 percent in 1986 to 30 percent in 1994 among two Baptist groups—the 16-million-member Southern Baptist Convention and the North American Baptist Conference, a group of roughly 400 churches in the U.S. Midwest and Canada.

“This cause could be from less-healthy eating patterns in the South, home to many Baptists,” Ferraro said. “But we controlled for residency, and still Baptist women were more likely to be obese. More research is needed to learn how denominations view overeating and obesity.”

Ferraro’s research of 2,500 adults also found not all religious activities correlated with obesity.

To be sure, women who watched or listened to religious television and radio were more likely to be obese. However, women who actually attended religious services were less likely to be obese.

And men who gained comfort from religious sources—instead of from food—were less likely to be obese as well.

After the Baptists, fundamentalist Protestant congregations—Church of Christ, Pentecostal, Assembly of God and Church of God—had the second-highest rate of obesity, at 22 percent.

In contrast, Catholic obesity rates remained steady at 17 percent during the research period, and Jewish obesity remained at 1 percent. Non-Christian faiths, including Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, increased in the number of obesity cases from 0.2 percent to 0.7 percent.

Doctors consider a person obese when he or she has a body-mass index of more than 30. Body-mass index is the ratio between body weight and

height—weight divided by metric height squared. Studies consistently show that 30 percent of adults nationwide are obese. An additional 34 percent are overweight, with a body-mass index of 25 to 30.

More than just a hindrance to energy levels, confidence and quality of life, obesity is expensive and socially isolating, researchers say. It can cause chronic illnesses like adult-onset diabetes and heart disease, as well as asthma, sleep apnea, liver disease, depression and reproductive problems.

[Richard Kreider](#), director of the [Baylor University Center for Exercise, Nutrition and Preventative Health Research](#), said the study made some good points, especially when it comes to Baptist life.

“There are certainly cultural issues, regionality issues and socialization issues about what people do when they get together,” he said. “What attracts people to meetings is food. Churches use that to get people to come to things. They’ll have after-service dinners and Sunday night ice cream—you name it.”

Those between-service donuts and heavy potluck casseroles take their toll. When food becomes the object of an event—or the event becomes an excuse for food—unhealthy weight gain can creep up on parishioners.

Part of the problem, Kreider said, is that food has become ingrained in the culture of some churches. Many people assume sports and exercise are OK for kids but not needed for adults, he said. Others just accept being overweight as OK.

It’s not. According to Kreider, an inactive non-smoker is as unhealthy as someone who smokes—a habit often frowned upon in Baptist circles.

“I think we need to be cognizant of what we tell people,” he said. “We tell people not to drink and not to smoke and that they should take care of the temple (body), but we don’t work out. Many leaders inside the pulpit are

way overweight. We don't think about the way it affects our health and the message it sends to our kids."

The key to fixing that, Kreider said, is to develop a different mentality.

Ferraro echoed that sentiment.

"These high-fat meals are saying implicitly, 'This is how we celebrate,'" Ferraro said. "Instead, religious leaders need to model and encourage physical health as an important part of a person's spiritual well being."

Religion does promote health in many ways. Prayer, meditation and social interaction all promote good health, and many churches have blood-pressure stations, exercise clubs and health fairs.

Another great way to stave off obesity is to disguise exercise as something fun, Kreider said, like softball leagues, church fitness centers and physical group activities. Churches also should be deliberate about providing wholesome food at events and speaking clearly and often from the pulpit about maintaining a healthy weight.

The most important thing, experts stress, is to take steps, no matter how small, in the right direction. Otherwise, taxpayers will pay the price.

"America is becoming known as a nation of gluttony and obesity, and churches are a feeding ground for this problem," Ferraro said in the report. "If religious leaders and organizations neglect this issue, they will contribute to an epidemic that will cost the health-care system millions of dollars and reduce the quality of life for many parishioners."

Ferraro's findings were published in the [Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion](#).

in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.