

Beyond Hunger: Understanding Food Noise

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The cultural conversation around obesity is often rooted in weight bias, stigma, and snap judgments –and the rise of GLP-1 weight management medications has only made the conversation more charged. WeightWatchers “Beyond Hunger: Understanding Food Noise” report brings impactful metrics to the forefront, focusing on people living with overweight or obesity and their experience of constant rumination about food, known as food noise.

Commissioned by WeightWatchers and STOP Obesity Alliance at George Washington University’s Redstone Global Center for Prevention and Wellness, the study reveals a deeper understanding of food noise, which may reflect a biological contribution to obesity, and brings it to the forefront of the cultural conversation around weight bias, GLP-1 medications, and Weight Health.

- Food noise is considered constant, intrusive thoughts about food that are disruptive to daily life and make healthful behaviors extremely difficult.

This report takes a deep dive into how food noise impacts more than half of individuals living with overweight or obesity, as well as provides a better understanding of the complex nature of obesity to help change harmful perceptions and biases.

Prevalence of Food Noise:

57%

say they've
experienced
food noise

12%

were familiar
with the term

While there is not yet a clinical definition for food noise, the phenomenon is well documented by physicians and their patients.

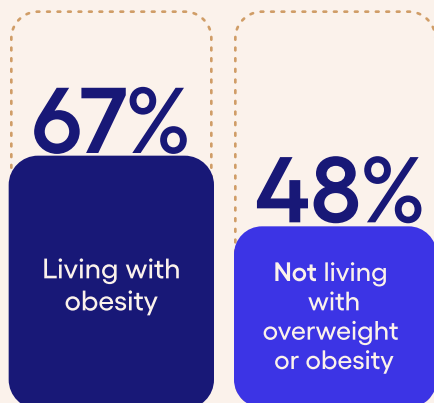
While the experience of food noise is pervasive among those living with overweight or obesity, few were familiar with the term beforehand.

Food noise is universal and can be experienced by anyone; the intensity can vary from person to person due to environment and learned behaviors, among other factors, in addition to biology. Many don't realize they have experienced food noise until their food noise has been mitigated.

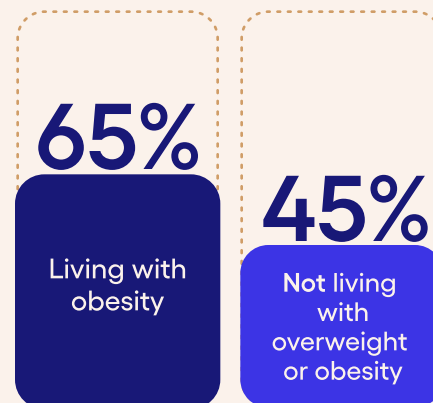
Impact on Weight Health:

While thinking about food is a natural part of everyone's day, for many living with overweight or obesity, thoughts of food can become intrusive and inescapable.

Wish they didn't think about food as often as they do



Fight urges to eat, even when they're not hungry

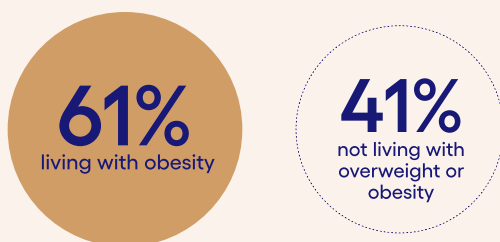


These symptoms that manifest from food noise can be a significant roadblock to weight health for those living with obesity. **More than half** of those trying to lose weight reported that food noise makes it more challenging to stick to a nutrition or exercise plan or make healthy food choices.

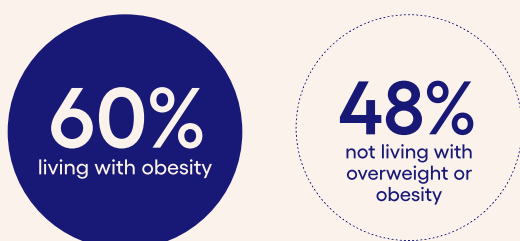
Activities that are more difficult because of

food noise

Sticking to nutrition or exercise plan for weight loss



Ability to make healthy food choices



“The difference between food noise being problematic or not comes down to how often and how intensely it's occurring. Food noise that occurs daily can be so intense and intrusive that it negatively impacts food choices and quality of life.

With constant, intrusive thoughts about food, it's difficult to navigate behavioral change without clinical help. The first step towards relief and greater empathy for those living with obesity is acknowledging that food noise is a real issue that many are facing.”

DR. SPENCER NADOLSKY

Obesity and Lipid Specialist Physician
and Medical Director, Weight Watchers

Weight Stigma + Judgment of Weight Loss Medication Use:

Obesity is a chronic condition, not a reflection of willpower.

People living with overweight or obesity are not only navigating their own internal bias (self-devaluation due to weight) and challenges like food noise but also managing how others treat them, as more than 50% of people living with obesity have been teased and discriminated against for their weight.

83%

of people with overweight or obesity

judge themselves

Simplistic judgments often obscure the realities of those living with obesity. Over half of those not living with overweight or obesity agree that those living with obesity aren't taking care of themselves—in reality, nearly half have tried more times than they can count to lose weight.

Perception

of those **not** living with overweight or obesity feel those who are

57% agree that those living with obesity aren't taking care of themselves

70% agree that sometimes a tough love approach is needed to motivate someone to lose weight

41% agree that you can tell a lot about someone's character by their weight

Reality

among those living with overweight and obesity

49% have tried to lose weight more times than they can count

81% are currently trying to lose weight

“Think about obesity like a jigsaw puzzle. Personal lifestyle behaviors are only one piece of the puzzle—but that’s the only piece our society focuses on. Ignoring the other pieces that reflect our environment, genetics, biology, and more means the puzzle will never be complete.

Obesity is complex, but the narrative in the mass media continues to be over-simplified and inaccurate.”

DR. REBECCA PUHL

Deputy Director for the Rudd
Center for Food Policy & Health

With the rise of GLP-1 medications, weight stigma is persisting in new forms: the majority of those not living with overweight or obesity agree that GLP-1 users are just taking the easy way out and have less respect for those losing weight with medications compared to other methods.

Weight stigma in the age of GLP-1s

48%

believe that people using GLP-1s for weight loss are prioritizing appearance over their health

Weight stigma

“people living with obesity are not taking care of themselves”

59%

say that they have more respect for people who lose weight without medication than those who use medication

“you can tell a lot about someone’s character by their weight”

47%

say that people using GLP-1s are taking the easy way out

“sometimes a tough love approach is needed to motivate someone to lose weight”

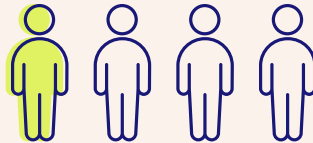
As quickly as GLP-1s are changing the landscape, misperceptions about the medications are multiplying. There is an enduring perception that people taking GLP-1s for weight loss are taking medications away from those who “really” need them, such as for the treatment of diabetes.

Additionally, nearly **three-quarters** of those not living with overweight or obesity think that GLP-1s help people lose weight without changing their behavior, and roughly 7 in 10 of those not living with overweight or obesity believe that people take GLP-1s to lose weight quickly, despite fewer than **2 in 10** GLP-1 users agreeing.

Our survey data also suggested that GLP-1-based weight stigma, like general weight stigma, can have a real impact on people's behavior, making it more difficult for them to take steps toward weight management.

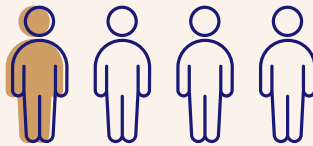
Avoid talking to friends and family about GLP-1s

1 in 4



Avoid asking a doctor about weight loss medications

1 in 4



“I think this double stigmatizing is frankly unfair. You can see how it would reinforce internalized bias, as it promotes perceptions that losing weight “the right way” is about willpower and motivation. There has been a lack of recognition of the ways in which our biology and pathophysiology make sustainable weight loss very difficult to achieve.”

DR. REBECCA PUHL

Deputy Director for the Rudd Center for Food Policy & Health

Changing Perceptions:

Weight management medications hit receptors in the brain that affect both satiety and the reward pathways, helping to dramatically quiet down food noise.

Those on GLP-1 medications have found the lack of all-consuming food-related thoughts allows them to accomplish their goals better and make healthy choices.

The top symptoms relieved

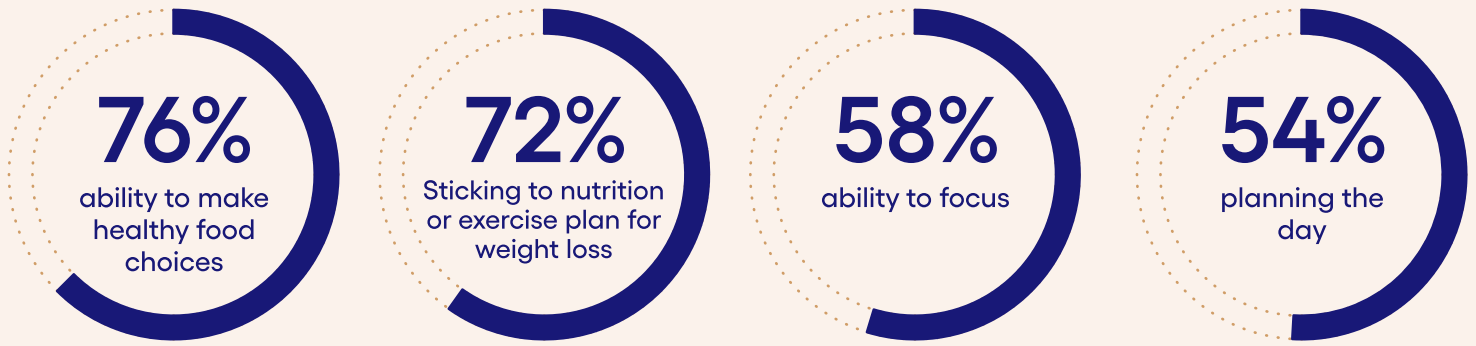
among GLP-1 users who experienced less food noise

69% constantly thinking about the next meal and snack

68% struggling with not feeling full, even right after a meal

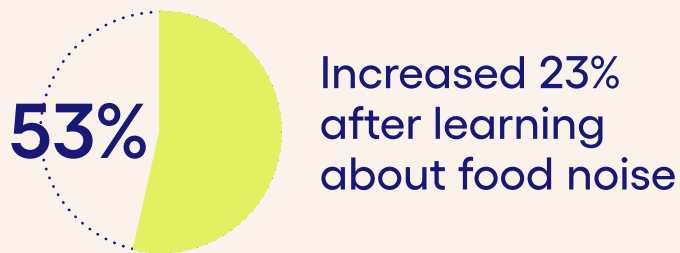
61% thinking obsessively about food

Activities that are easier after taking GLP-1s



Understanding the concept of food noise can help change harmful perceptions of those living with overweight and obesity as well as those taking GLP-1 medications to manage their obesity. After learning about food noise, the notion that GLP-1s are a tool for managing a chronic condition vs. an easy way out increased by **23%** among those not living with overweight or obesity.

Believes that GLP-1s are a tool for managing a chronic condition



“As our understanding of the challenge of living with obesity continues to grow, the recognition of food noise provides a new insight into why a preoccupation with food may be hard wired, and is not simply caused by a lack of will power,” said **William Dietz, MD, Ph.D., Director, STOP Obesity Alliance.**

“This first-of-its-kind consumer research truly helps define this concept, allowing us to better educate people living with obesity and others in a way that drives greater understanding, compassion and ultimately reduces stigma.”

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Methodology: The “Beyond Hunger: Understanding Food Noise” report was developed using consumer data collected by Havas’ research consultancy, TRIPTK, on behalf of WeightWatchers and the STOP Obesity Alliance at George Washington University. The survey was done online among 1,174 Americans living in diverse bodies. Two hundred sixty-four of those surveyed have a BMI of under 25 (not living with overweight or obesity), 284 have a BMI of 25 - 29 (living with overweight), and 454 have a BMI of 30+(living with obesity). Two hundred ninety-five of all those surveyed were using GLP-1 medications.