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MY TURN

Cutting obesity epidemic down to size

By Linda Bacon
Special to The Times

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The holidays are upon us, presenting wonderful opportunity to celebrate and enjoy good food. No doubt many of us will heartily indulge ... and feel the guilt.

The guilt is hard to avoid. Hardly a day goes by without the media trumpeting obesity fears: 65% of us are overweight or obese, we're gaining weight at unprecedented rates, we don't know how to eat, we're not exercising enough, we're the first generation that's going to die younger than our parents.

As the holidays recede, diet season will resume. Countless individuals will search desperately for the diet that's going to save them. They'll jump from one craze to another — or perhaps go the "sensible" route: watching their calories, monitoring their fat intake or dropping desserts.

But what if we learned that our fears around that dreaded fat were misplaced? That "overweight" may confer some protection that actually results in increased longevity? That when factors such as activity, nutrition and history of dieting and weight cycling are considered, the relationship between weight and disease disappears? That biologic safeguards prevent most people from maintaining weight loss, despite vigilant dieting and exercise? That the body has a built-in regulatory system to maintain a healthful weight, if only we'd trust it?

Remarkably, there is substantial evidence to support all of these contentions in the scientific literature. It's remarkable not because they are illogical, but because the scientific peer review process tends to filter out anything that challenges the status quo.

Although it is true that we're moderately fatter than we used to be, life expectancy has also increased dramatically during the same time period in which our weight has risen (from 71 years in 1970 to 77 years in 2003). Meanwhile, heart disease rates have plummeted, and many common diseases emerge at older ages and are less severe. We are simply not seeing the catastrophic consequences predicted to result from the "obesity epidemic."

At some point, we have to yield to the evidence. Trumpeting obesity fears and hounding people to lose weight is not just misguided, it's downright damaging.

So dump the guilt and the diet resolutions and enjoy the holiday season. It is possible to be vital and healthy, to feel better about ourselves and to feel attractive in whatever body we inhabit. It is possible to achieve a healthful weight by trusting internal mechanisms, such as hunger, appetite and

satiety.

The new paradigm champions happiness and health for people of all sizes — and trusting that our bodies know best how to achieve and maintain a healthy weight. Well-being and healthful habits are more important than any number on the scale.

Fortunately, the road to health and happiness is wide enough for everyone.

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