

Obesity could be a social disease

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Congratulations to Mark Allen and John Farone, Brazosport Relay Triathlon Committee co-chairs, the contest committee, the city of Lake Jackson, sponsors and supporters, participants and volunteers for a memorable 25th anniversary event. Locals and out-of-towners alike had fun — and good things to say about the contest.

As you read this column, I am on the road headed home from the 50th class reunion of Fair Park High School in Shreveport, La. I shall have seen some classmates I haven't seen since we graduated. Most likely we have reminisced about our high school experiences, lied about how successfully and significantly we have lived our lives and spent a great deal of time reviewing our aches, pains, maladies and medications. Unfortunately many of my classmates are dead, and many others are in very poor health. I'm lucky I still can swim, bike and run at 68.

Going through my old senior yearbook, I noticed some of my classmates are overweight but few are morbidly obese.

The most recent data on overweight youngsters from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, published on

the Web site of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, indicate the prevalence of overweight youngsters ages 12 through 19 increased from 6.1 percent between 1971 and 1974 to 17.4 percent in 2003-2004.

Such studies, I doubt, existed for when my peers and I were 12-19 in 1946-58.

I would guess from the pictures in my yearbook it was about 3 percent.

"The Obesity Epidemic and Texas Students," another article on the CDC Web site, states 14 percent of Texas students are overweight, and 15 percent are at risk for being overweight.

A study reported July 25, 2007, by Dr. Jon LaPook, CBS News medical

correspondent, suggests obesity is a "socially contagious disease" spread through friends, spouses and siblings.

"Lazy lifestyles and super-sized portions are partly to blame," LaPook said. "But researchers say it's also because we look at our friends for an idea of normal body size.

"If the social norm is to be at a higher weight, then other people accept their body weight at a higher level," said LaPook, citing Dr. Lou Aronne, a specialist on weight loss and obesity.

Weight problems and obesity suggest the studies are "social viruses."

My friends in high school in the 1950s were not obese. Most of us were active in ROTC and/or

recreational or varsity athletics. My current friends now are runners, swimmers, cyclists and triathletes. They are not obese.

"The study also found the strength of the relationship also matters," LaPook said.

"Among casual friends, when one becomes obese, the risk for the other increases 57 percent," LaPook said. "For close friends, the risk nearly triples."

Does all this mean if your friends are fat, abandon them and find new, slim friends?

I don't think so.

We runners will not abandon our corpulent companions.

Youngsters should cultivate friendships with those who do not have a weight problem. A better idea is for best friends to become involved in a physical fitness program and exercise together and convert others to a better, slimmer lifestyle.

We all will be changed. Some of those muscled athletes might have gone to seed. Some of those svelte high school beauties will be shapely in a different way. It doesn't matter. I will have been overjoyed to see them for what might be the last time in our lives. In my memories, I shall remember them for how athletic and how beautiful they were in our yearbook. I shall be joyful that we are alive and have gathered for a celebration of life and our lives.

Perhaps some of my classmates will join me in a morning run and celebrate our age and our lasting friendships.

Bill Shaw's running column appears in The Facts every other Monday.

