

# THE NEW SCIENCE OF SKINNY

[Video transcript](#) interview with science writer and  
*The New York Times* journalist Gary Taubes.

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Let's get right to it, Gary. Why is what we're doing right now, as a culture, where we're telling people – the medical community right now is telling everyone – eat less; exercise more. That's how you lose weight. Why doesn't that work and what does work?

Gary: Ok, let me give you a little historical background.

Ok.

Gary: This is how I like to think of things.

Sure.

Gary: Typically, for the past 50-odd years, 60-odd years, it's always been the message: the reason we get fat is we eat too much, we consume more calories than we expend. And then, if you talk to researchers, they always say, "it's calories in, calories out. You take in more calories than you burn, then this is what makes you fat." While they've been telling us this, we've gotten fatter and fatter and fatter. There's been this obesity epidemic, you know. In the 1960s, one out of every eight or nine Americans was obese; now it's one out of every three. So, of course, their assumption is that we're just not listening. You know, that we don't have will power, and the food

industry makes it impossible so we blame the food industry 'cuz they make too much food available. And everybody's to fault but the researchers.

Hmmm.

Gary: And what I learned, you know, I went into this believing what everyone believes. I was an investigative science reporter. All I wanted to do was, you know, find out sort of what the real science says. So, I started going back – so, what you can do, you know, with the Internet and everything, you can buy, you can find every piece of science, every book, ever article. So, it doesn't mean you download 'em, but you can find, like, a book store in Germany that will sell you some, you know, 1920 German textbook for \$8.00 if there's an article on obesity in there you want to read.

Sure. Sure.

Gary: And if you look around this office, I probably now have one of the best private collections of obesity books in the world.

Wow.

Gary: I've spent way too much money just buying them...

They're not cheap, right?

Gary: And so, what you find out when you go back probably prior to the second World War, the best science in the world – medical science in the world – prior to the second World War, was all done in Europe, specifically Germany and Austria and Italy and France. And these people were clinical investigators who had patients, they saw patients, they took histories of patients, but they also theorized about what was going on. They created the science of genetics, of endocrinology, the science of hormones, so what these people did – they didn't think of, you know, obesity...If you look nowadays, if you read any article, it'll say obesity is a disorder of energy balance.

That's the whole theory.

Gary: They said that was silly. It's funny...they used kind of the first principles. They said obesity is sort of excess fat accumulation, which sounds silly but it's sort of, you know, if you're too fat, the excessive fat accumulation is a disorder of excess fat accumulation.

Yep.

Gary: But as soon as you look at it like that, you just ask the question "what regulates fat accumulation?"

That's the question that people have forgotten to ask.

Gary: That's the question. Like when somebody tells you that you're eating too much, they don't care what hormones and enzymes regulate your fat...

Yeah.

Gary: It's completely irrelevant.

Yeah.

Gary: As a matter of fact, they think the problem's in your head...

Right.

Gary: That you've got a behavioral problem. This is sort of one of the things that happened in 1960s – obesity became a science of psychology, psychiatry, you know. So, if you're fat, or you've got any kind of eating disorder, and these psychologists or psychiatrists are gonna try to train you to eat slower or to chew your food more or... My favorite example was to have your wife not to have sex with you unless you lost weight.

Wow.

Gary: That was one of the ways they'd use to try to get you to change your behavior. "The Biggest Loser" – changes the behavior of the people. They say, instead of being sedentary, work out.

All day long.

Gary: All day long and you'll lose weight.

So, why doesn't that work and what does work?

Gary: Well, what happens is, I mean, if you starve someone or get them to work out six hours a day, they'll lose weight. They'll also get hungry.

Yeah.

Gary: They'll be hungry all the time, so it's not a long-term treatment. It treats sort of the most extreme symptom of whatever this disorder is, which is the excess fat. It treats it temporarily, but nobody could keep it up. Like I'd love to see what happens with *The Biggest Loser* people because...

Long-term.

Gary: When I did *The Larry King Show*, one of the girls, women, on the show with us had been on *The Biggest Loser* and we shared a cab coming home. And she said, "Nobody, nobody maintains their weight." I mean, nobody maintains weight loss in real life either because it's not natural to semi-starve yourself, just as it's not natural to work out six hours a day...

Yeah.

Gary: You know, and burn three or 4,000 calories. You can't keep it up forever. Something else is going on. So, in getting back to our pre-World War II Europeans, they said, you know, obesity is a sort of fat accumulation. We want to know what regulates fat accumulation because whatever regulates fat accumulation's probably gonna be the problem.

Yeah. That's it; that's it.

Gary: And the way you have to think of it is, you know, today we think of it like, if you get bigger, you have to eat too much, you know, take

in more calories than you expend. And what they said is, whatever hormone makes you accumulate fat, ok, whatever that is that's gonna make you eat too much, you know, if your fat tissue starts to grow, your body's got to take in calories to sustain that growth. And the example they use is a growing child.

Yeah.

Gary: This is how you think about it. When we think about growing children...

Yep.

Gary: You know, children, when they're growing, are in what's called "positive energy balance." They're taking in more calories than they expend. They're overeating, which is what we mean when we say they're overeating, but they're not growing because they're overeating; they're overeating because they're growing.

Small distinction.

Gary: And this is why, when your kids are growing, they get voracious appetites, they lie around the house all day, they sleep more, because their bodies are growing and then the appetite is, kind of the way the body compensates, and they don't have enough energy to expend, so they want to sleep all the time. And, while we know this inherently with our children, then we turn around with fat people and we say, "ah well, they get fat because they eat too much" instead of "they're eating too much because they're getting fat."

Interesting.

Gary: So these Germans and Austrians vanish...

Yeah.

Gary: Ok, and World War II comes along, there's this, you know, unlike like in physics when we had to embrace these European scientists because we wanted to compete with the Russians, in medicine we could share less. So, and after the war, the field is

reinvented at the Harvard School of Nutrition. The leading researcher is a French man named Jean Maier, who fought in the French Resistance, won a lot of medals for bravery. One of his colleagues said to me, “You know, he hated the Germans. He killed a lot of them.”

Yeah.

Gary: And from Jean Maier downward, there was this kind of refusal to read the prewar German literature, the research articles that had been published by these German and Austrian scientists. You know, a lot of them were Jewish.

Yeah. They really were, right? So, what did it say? Tell us; this is it.

Gary: What it said was, you know, we have to know what regulates fat accumulation. We didn’t know what it was. So, my point is, I’m making a long story long here...

No, but that was the question, that was the right question.

Gary: So, while the Harvard people and the whole sort of post-World War II American research community goes out and says, “look, it’s all about gluttony and sloth...”

Right. They weren’t asking the right question.

Gary: Remember, we’ve talked before about Louis Newburg.

Yes, 1929, Michigan.

Gary: The one American scientist researcher, the most influential American obesity research said, “Look, fat people have perverted appetites” – that’s what he called it. They take in more calories than they expend. They’re either gluttons, some of them just don’t know better, some of them are just ignorant, some of them have been trained by their parents to eat more. But, for whatever reason you get fat, it’s this “perverted appetite.” And unlike the Germans and Austrians, Newburg’s crew spanned the war. So, after the war, you’d

find all these doctors saying, “Look, Louis Newburg proved that obese people are just gluttons. They have this perverted appetite.”

So, the question was never asked again and was lost.

Gary: The question was never asked again. Meanwhile, biochemists and physiologists – these are PhDs instead of MDs – start working out what is fat accumulation.

Aha. So the answer starts coming back.

Gary: So the answer starts coming back.

The question is there.

Gary: The technology isn’t available until 1956.

1956 – A huge point in technology changes.

Gary: And then, so there are two discoveries. One is a way to measure fatty acids in the bloodstream and then, 1960, a couple – a man and woman – Rosalyn Diallo and Solomon Burson figured out how to measure hormones in the bloodstream. By 1965, we know for sure what regulates fat accumulation.

And the answer is?

Gary: The answer is the **hormone insulin...**

Um-hm.

Gary: And **dietary carbohydrates.**

Wow.

Gary: **The insulin – we secrete insulin as a response to carbohydrates. What insulin does is put fat into fat tissue. It’s one of many things that does.**

Sure.



Gary: But it puts fat in the fat tissue and you actually need to eat carbohydrates to store fat in your fat tissue because, in order to do so, you need this molecule that's got a lot of different names for reasons I can never understand – glycerol 3 phosphate, alpha-glycerol phosphate, it's a kind of activated form of the molecule glycerol and in the short forms, we only get this molecule – for all intents and purposes – you only get it from eating carbs.

And that is it.

Gary: So if you want to store fat in your fat tissue, or excess fat, you have to eat carbohydrates to do it.

That is the recipe.

Gary: That's the recipe. If you don't eat the carbs, you can't store the fat. You can't get fat without eating carbohydrates.

And these people who say if you eat too much protein or too much fat...

Gary: What they're working on is this "calories in, calories out," it's all the same because they all contain the same amount of energy. But it doesn't have anything to do with the energy. The energy's irrelevant.

All that matters is the effect of these nutrients on the hormones and enzymes that control fat accumulation. You know? It's sort of – I mean, it's funny 'cuz you go back and you read one of the, this idea that the energy contained in a calorie of protein is the same as the energy contained in a calorie of carbohydrates or fat. That's what people mean when they say "a calorie's a calorie's a calorie." That was worked out by a German named Max Robner from about 1880 to 1905.

Sure.

Gary: And you read Robner's stuff. I own his book; it was translated, I think, in 1961 by a U.S. military guy. I own a copy of it. And he says, "Yeah, all the calories are the same." But that's irrelevant. What you want to worry about is how these nutrients affect what he called the ductless glands.

The ductless?

Gary: Ductless glands, which are basically the glands like this pancreas and the, you know, that secrete hormones.

Sure. Sure.

Gary: It's just the old-fashioned name for them.

So the bottom line, Gary, is if we have high levels of insulin, we are overweight, we'll lock in all the fat we've ever had and never release it.

Gary: Yeah. Because if insulin is elevated, you cannot get your fat out of your fat tissue, and what fat does circulate, you won't...

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