

# searching for answers...

by Ron Sansone

tracking  
obesity  
awareness  
through  
**GOOGLE.**

## Obesity isn't a vanity issue; it's a health issue.

**Though looking good is never as important as feeling good, obesity is often dismissed as an aesthetic shortcoming. Excess body fat can have adverse effects on general health, but can we really see the problem staring back at us through the mirror?**

Tracking awareness of obesity has traditionally been a challenge, but our understanding of obesity awareness is advancing due to new innovations in search engine monitoring. Thanks to search engine data collection, we now have a more complete picture of obesity awareness across the United States. This enables us to determine personal views on obesity by state.

Rising obesity rates are cause for concern as they're frequently linked to heart disease and other health problems.<sup>1</sup> Obesity contributes to cardiovascular disease, sleep apnea, degenerative arthritis, type-2 diabetes and certain types of cancer.<sup>2</sup> While the link between obesity and these conditions is commonly known, people may not be making the connection on a personal level.

## WEIGHT BY STATE

Even with all the light, diet, low fat and low carb options now available, the past 30 years have seen a dramatic increase in obesity in the United States. In 1980, the national average of obese adults was 15 percent. Today, that average exceeds 33 percent.<sup>3</sup>

A 2009 study conducted by Trust for America's Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation found that 31 states possess adult obesity rates over 25 percent. Mississippi leads the pack, weighing in at 32.5 percent. And Alabama, West Virginia and Tennessee are not far behind. Colorado, in contrast, is the only state with an obesity rate below 20 percent.<sup>4</sup>

It's clear that there are states in which obesity is a concern. But are residents of these states aware of, or interested in, the problem of obesity?

Google Insights for Search<sup>5</sup> can provide answers. Developed by Google Labs, this analysis tool compares user searching patterns across specific regions, categories and time periods. By analyzing user search habits, we can identify how aware of or interested in obesity-related issues people are by state. Cross-referenced by actual statewide obesity rates, this awareness data can paint a picture of regional obesity perceptions.



## Along with the risks of obesity, tools for prevention and knowledge of available options must be communicated at the regional level.

According to Google Insights for Search, West Virginia (the third most obese state) showed the most interest in the search term obesity. Iowa and Kentucky demonstrated the next highest topical interest levels. While West Virginia and Kentucky have high obesity rates, they also display strong interest and awareness of the issue. Indiana, South Dakota, Michigan, Idaho, North Dakota, Mississippi and Delaware round out the top ten states interested in obesity based on Google Insights for Search data.

Exploring deeper topical search terms produces a similar list of states with interest in obesity –one that differs from the top ten most obese states. Other related search phases such as overweight, weight loss and weight loss treatment were examined.

Analysis of these keyword terms uncovers additional keywords with rising search interest, including childhood obesity, childhood obesity statistics and obesity rates. Increased interest in childhood obesity suggests a public desire to educate the youth on weight issues. Based on this finding, preventive actions such as diet and exercise may be a vital message to convey to parents to help them raise healthy children.

For individuals past preventive maintenance but receptive to corrective action, searches on weight loss treatments should be common, especially in the top ten states displaying obesity interest. The results were contrary to assumptions, however, suggesting low awareness of treatment options despite high awareness of obesity problems.

A lack of “treatment” searches could be a matter of perception. Users may not consider solutions for weight loss to be “treatments” but rather lump them together as “surgeries.” Solutions such as the Roux-en-Y gastric bypass, the sleeve gastrectomy and gastric banding are minimally invasive treatment options,<sup>6</sup> and such procedures may need to be distinguished from more drastic bariatric surgery to promote awareness

obese states, and all are active in searching for obesity-related terms.

While this indicates a positive trend in awareness among those with obesity issues, there are still high-obesity rate states lacking awareness of the statewide problem. And still others lack awareness of weight loss surgery treatment options. These states may not be receiving such critical information in manner that speaks to their concerns.

Along with the risks of obesity, tools for prevention and knowledge of available treatment options must be communicated at the regional level. Bariatric centers and treatment providers would do well to geo-target their messages to appropriate regions through advertising and educational campaigns. Though solutions to the problem exist, awareness of them is not as high as awareness of the issue itself. Until the right guidance is successfully conveyed to, or found by, the appropriate audience, obesity rates will continue to grow.

### RESOURCES:

1. “U.S. Obesity Trends: Trends by State 1985–2008.” Center for Disease Control and Prevention. <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/trends.html>
2. “Obesity.” Wikipedia. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Obesity>.
3. “How Obesity Policies are Failing in America.” Trust for America’s Health. <http://healthyamericans.org/reports/obesity2009/>
4. “Obesity Rates Continue to Climb in U.S.” US News. <http://health.usnews.com/health-news/diet-fitness/diabetes/articles/2009/07/01/obesity-rates-continue-to-climb-in-us.html>
5. “Google Insights for Search.” Google Labs. <http://www.google.com/insights/search/#>.
6. “Weight Loss Surgery Options.” <http://www.realize.com/dtcf/pages/weight-loss-surgery-options.htm>.

## OBESITY AND WEIGHT LOSS TREATMENT AWARENESS

As shown through the Google Insights for Search data, many states with high obesity rates do, in fact, display high awareness of weight-related issues. Mississippi, Alabama, West Virginia, Kentucky, Michigan and Ohio are among the top ten most