

The relationship between wallet, body and soul.

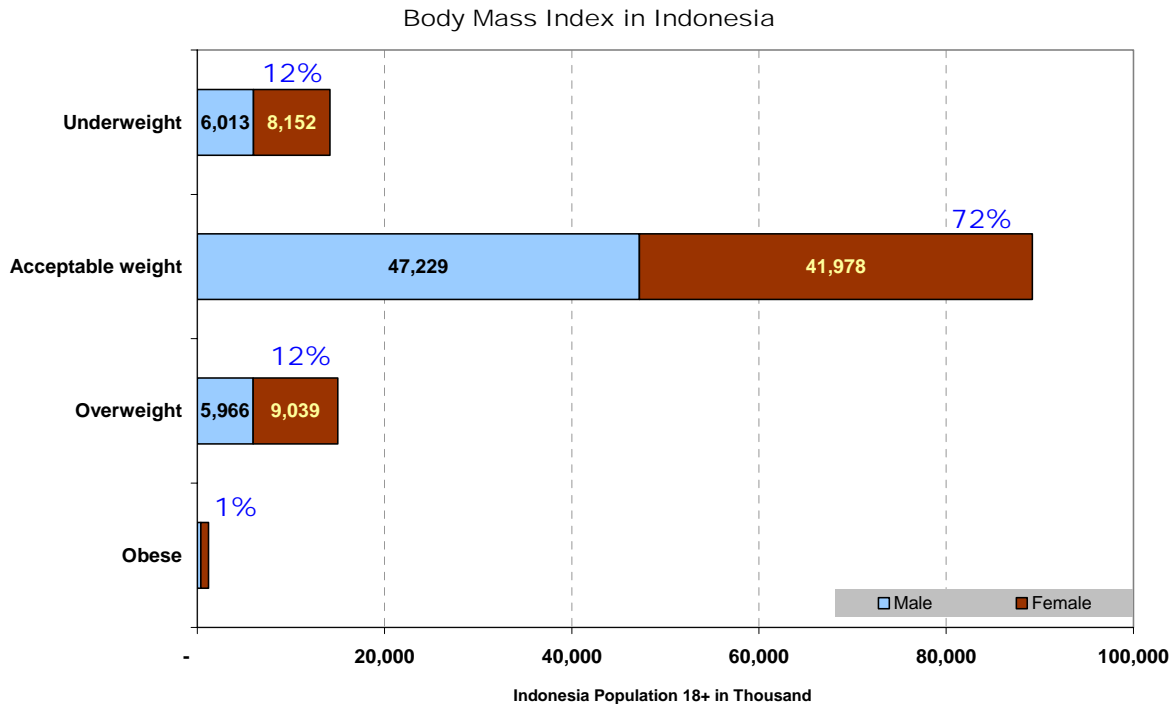
Lambert Adolphe Quetelet (1796-1874), the Belgian mathematician, is famous for his 'Body Mass Index' (also called the 'Quetelet Index'). Though we can argue about racial differences in physiognomies it remains the official measurement for obesity around the globe, to this day. BMI is calculated as weight in kilograms divided by the square of height in meters.

By that token the USA and Australia rank No 1 and No 2 respectively, not respectably. Over 60 per cent of the two populations are overweight. Considering that the two countries also have the dubious distinctions of being the highest per capita polluters on the planet, common sense says that affluence has its downsides too. It is heartening to see that Australia wrote a \$200 million dollar cheque last week for the rehabilitation of Indonesia's forests in the effort to reduce global warming. Environmentalists everywhere can also take comfort from the fact that the Opposition in Australia are committed to signing the Kyoto Protocol if they are voted in at the next election. Both major political parties there are talking up the need to rapidly develop and export 'clean-coal' technology, and Indonesian business would do well to exploit obvious opportunities from that laudable pursuit.

But I digress. How do Indonesians fare on their weight as well as their attitudes to food? Is there a connection between the two? These questions are based on trends continuously measured by Roy Morgan Single Source, Indonesia's largest syndicated survey. That study is now expanding to include over 27,000 respondents this year, projected to reflect the behaviour of 90% of the population over the age of 14.

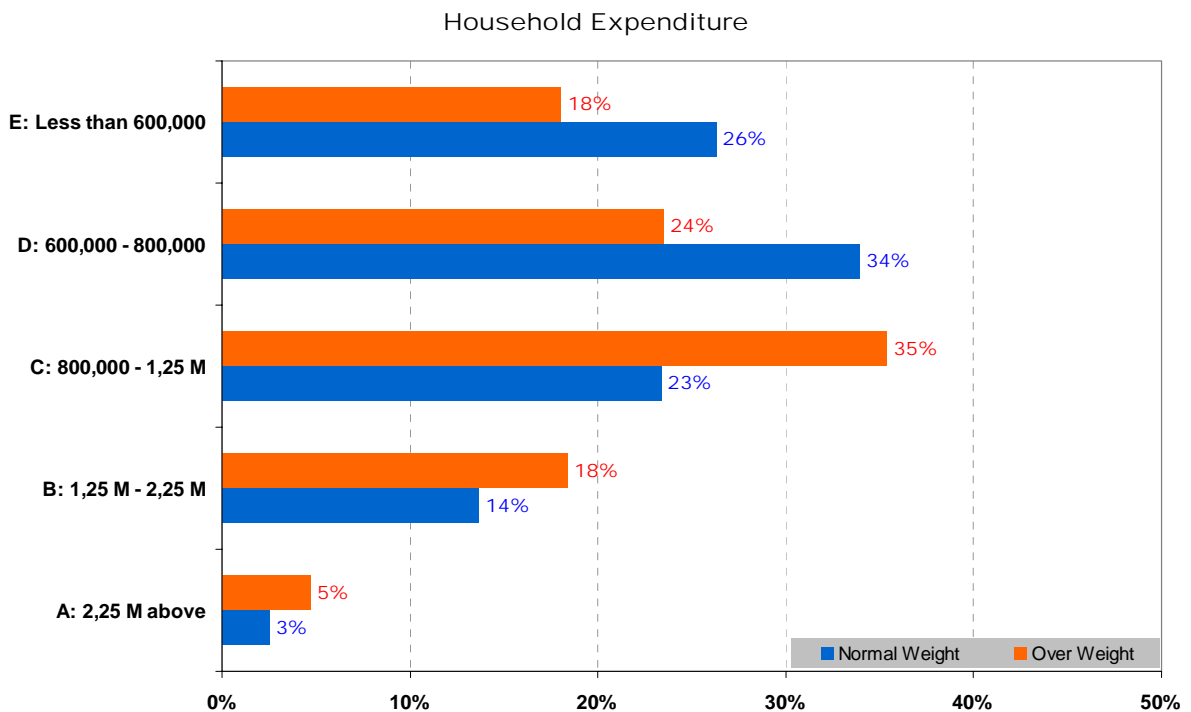
The good news is that Indonesia is doing very well on Body Mass Index. Three out of four adults are within the "Acceptable Weight" range. Only 12 per cent are overweight and less than 1 per cent are obese. Another 12 per cent are underweight.

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What is noticeable though is that there are many more women underweight than men, as well as overweight or obese. Bad jokes about poverty and weight are irrelevant as there is no correlation between the two. In fact, the proportion of overweight women in comparison to men is highest in Rural Indonesia. On the other hand, there is a definite connection between affluence and weight. The more money there is in the family, the greater the likelihood of there being a family member who is overweight. This is understandable, because financial comfort facilitates conspicuous consumption across the board. People with more money to spend, do just that. They spend it, not only on living the good life but also on charity, making Americans and Australians among the highest per capita contributors in the world.

Other than the fact that overweight women are “constantly watching their weight” more than others, and therefore tend to exercise less, there are no other significant differences in behaviour. Their attitudes to food, entertainment, religion or the environment are similar to their normal-weight counterparts in each segment of society. Due to the fact that most Indonesians are within the acceptable weight range, most visitors to fast-food restaurants aren’t overweight. Of the overweight visitors to such restaurant chains, the majority are women.



Weight gain becomes particularly significant in Indonesia after the age of 35, remaining a problem later on in life. With sports or formal exercise not as popular as doctors would like them to be, not much physical effort is made to address the concern. Unlike many countries in the affluent West, obesity is not an issue for the overwhelming majority in Indonesia. In Indonesia, it is a condition that mostly affects the affluent.

If there is a lesson here, it is simply this: Moderation is good. Waste not, want not. Most marketers have difficulty in promoting moderation as they are driven most of all by the need to increase sales. Many fall into the trap of achieving ever-higher sales targets even at the cost of margins or by launching cheaper brands that cannibalise their own. Is the converse possible? Food for thought. At least it’s not fattening.

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