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Portly President Taft helped usher in modern obesity care, tried Atkins-like diet

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Way before Weight Watchers or "The Biggest Loser," a president known for his girth was helping to usher in a modern approach to treating obesity.

Got a nagging doctor? The 27th president, William H. Taft did, way back in the early 1900s. A medical historian has analyzed letters between the two, complete with food diaries and daily weigh-ins surely recognizable to many of today's dieters. Have a problem with yo-yo dieting and weight gain? Yep, Taft did, too.

Monday's report offers a rare peek at the history of obesity, through the experiences of one of the first American public figures to struggle openly with weight - and how a doctor aided in an era when physician treatment of obesity was just emerging.

Taft's "rise to political power coincided with this change in medical thinking, which led to the first celebrity weight loss patient," said Deborah Levine, an assistant professor at Rhode Island's Providence College. Her report, part of research for a book about the course of obesity in the U.S., appears Monday in the journal *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

Sports fans might recognize Taft as the latest addition to the Washington Nationals' racing presidents. History buffs know he's the only president-turned-Supreme Court chief justice. But he's also remembered as the president whose weight, at times well over 300 pounds, made headlines.

Taft hired British dieting expert Nathaniel Yorke-Davies in 1905, four years before becoming president. Then 314 pounds, Taft was worried about heartburn and other health problems - he was famously fatigued, presumably from obesity-caused sleep apnea - and possibly also about his career, Levine wrote.

The candid exchanges between doctor and patient highlight the ups and down of weight loss.

"I feel in excellent condition. I used to suffer from acidity of stomach, and I suppose that was due to overloading it," Taft wrote at one point.

Dusting off those archives is important to remind people that obesity isn't some scary new 21st-century problem, said Dr. Scott Kahan of George Washington University and the STOP Obesity Alliance.

Yes, obesity rates have surged to epidemic levels over the past few decades. But waistlines actually began to expand in the mid-19th century, as food became easier to cultivate and distribute, Kahan said. Diet books and pamphlets began flourishing. Where women's corsets offered some tightening, Levine says obesity belts were developed for men.

Even then it was clear there was no quick fix. And if you think high-calorie restaurant food is only a recent problem, well, Taft wrote a relative that all the formal dinners required in politics sabotaged his efforts. In his first year with Yorke-Davies, Taft lost 59 pounds, Levine found, only to regain it. Only after leaving the White House did Taft shed significant weight and keep it off, with help from a different doctor, she noted.

"It's really, really hard to lose weight and keep it off. If it wasn't, we'd all be thin," said Kahan, who was struck by similarities between Taft's struggles and many weight-loss efforts today. "We recognize this problem as a disease, and yet at the same time we expect people to just be able to manage it once we write down a diet for them."

Today, doctors know that for someone who's obese, shedding even 5 percent to 10 percent of the original weight can improve health, he added.

Yorke-Davies had written a popular diet book, "Foods for the Fat: A Treatise on Corpulency and a Dietary for its Cure." He and Taft had a long-distance relationship. The doctor mailed a three-page list of allowed and forbidden foods - heavy on lean meats and reducing sugar, almost a prelude to the Atkins diet. Taft was to weigh himself daily and mail a weekly report.

Levine compared the handwritten weigh-ins and the typed letters to the doctor. Sometimes Taft cheated.

And Yorke-Davies nagged, politely, but a lot. One month the doctor fussed that Taft's weight loss was only 9 pounds, not the intended 14. When Taft slacked off, the doctor wrote that he'd heard "you are much stouter than you were a few months ago."

Levine concludes that some core practices - close doctor-patient communication, tracking weight and food diaries - still are in use. The challenge is to find a balance between helpful advice and nagging, said Dr. Mladen Golubic of the Cleveland Clinic Wellness Institute. Some of the clinic's patients opt for daily, personalized emails to track their progress.

"You don't want to be harsh," Golubic said. But "you need to nudge them."



Vocabulary

definitions from <www.learnersdictionary.com>

dwin·dle  /'dwɪndl/ verb

dwin·dles; dwin·dled; dwin·dling

[no obj] : to gradually become smaller

▪ Our energy dwindled as the meeting dragged on. ▪ The town's population is dwindling away. ▪ dwindling resources/numbers

gre·gar·i·ous  /grɪ'gerijəs/ adjective

[more gregarious; most gregarious] 1 : enjoying the company of other people

▪ She is outgoing and gregarious. ▪ a gregarious personality

2 biology : tending to live in groups

▪ gregarious animals

— gre·gar·i·ous·ly adverb

— gre·gar·i·ous·ness noun [noncount]

¹har·ness  /'hɑːnəs/ noun

plural har·ness·es

[count] 1 : a set of straps that are placed on an animal (such as a horse) so that it can pull something heavy

2 : a set of straps that are used to connect a person to something (such as a parachute or a seat)

▪ The pilot strapped himself into his harness before takeoff. ▪ a safety harness

²harness verb

harnesses; harnessed; harness·ing

[+ obj] 1 a : to put a harness on (an animal)

▪ harness the horses

b : to attach (an animal) to something with a harness

▪ The horses were harnessed to the wagon.

2 : to use (something) for a particular purpose

▪ Engineers are finding new ways to harness the sun's energy to heat homes. ▪ The company is harnessing technology to provide better service to its customers. ▪ They harnessed the power of the waterfall to create electricity. ▪ harness anger to fight injustice

3 : to connect or join (things) together

▪ She harnessed several computers (together) to work as one large computer.

in·tri·cate  /'ɪntrəkeɪt/ adjective

[more intricate; most intricate] : having many parts

▪ intricate machinery ▪ an intricate [=complex] design/pattern ▪ The movie has an intricate plot.

— in·tri·cate·ly adverb

▪ intricately woven fabric ▪ an intricately carved mantel

me·tic·u·lous  /mə'tɪkjələs/ adjective

[more meticulous; most meticulous] : very careful about doing something in an extremely accurate and exact way

▪ He described the scene in meticulous detail. ▪ She did meticulous work. ▪ He keeps meticulous records. ▪ He is meticulous about keeping accurate records. ▪ She's a meticulous researcher.

— me·tic·u·lous·ly adverb

▪ It's a beautiful Victorian house, meticulously restored. ▪ meticulously careful research

— me·tic·u·lous·ness  /mə'tɪkjələsnəs/ noun [noncount]

obese  /oʊ'bi:s/ adjective

[more obese; most obese] : very fat : fat in a way that is unhealthy
▪ providing medical treatment for obese patients

— obe·si·ty  /oʊ'bi:səti/ noun [noncount]
▪ the problem of obesity in children

se·nile  /'si:najəl/ adjective

[more senile; most senile] : showing a loss of mental ability (such as memory) in old age
▪ a senile man in his eighties ▪ Her mother is becoming/getting/going senile.

— se·nil·i·ty  /sɪ'nɪləti/ noun [noncount]
▪ Paranoia is a possible sign of senility.

sti·fle  /'staɪflə/ verb

sti·fles; stifled; sti·fling

1 [+ obj] a : to not allow yourself to do or express (something)
▪ trying to stifle a cry/yawn ▪ I had to stifle the desire/urge to yell “Stop!”
b : to stop (someone) from doing or expressing something
▪ Students at the school are stifled by the pressure to score high on tests.

2 [+ obj] : to make (something) difficult or impossible
▪ Too many regulations stifle innovation. ▪ something that stifles the growth of the plant/economy

3 a [no obj] : to be unable to breathe easily
▪ I wish we could go outside instead of stifling in this tiny room.
b [+ obj] : to make (someone) unable to breathe or unable to breathe easily
▪ He was almost stifled by the smoke.

shud·der  /ʃʌdə/ verb

shud·ders; shud·dered; shud·der·ing

[no obj] 1 of a person : to shake because of fear, cold, etc. — often + with ▪ He shuddered [=quivered, trembled] with fear when he heard the scream. — often used figuratively ▪ I shudder at the thought of what might happen. = I shudder to think (of) what might happen. [=I am very worried/fearful about what might happen]

2 of a thing : to shake violently
▪ The old car shuddered to a halt. ▪ The house shuddered as a plane flew overhead.

— shudder noun, plural shudders [count]
▪ I felt a shudder [=tremble] in the floor as the truck drove by. ▪ a shudder of fear

as·cet·ic  /ə'setɪk/ adjective

[more ascetic; most ascetic] formal : relating to or having a strict and simple way of living that avoids physical pleasure
▪ an ascetic monk ▪ an ascetic scholar ▪ the ascetic [=severe, austere] life of monks ▪ an ascetic diet of rice and beans

— ascetic noun, plural ascetics [count]
▪ She left the comforts of home to live the life of an ascetic.

— as·cet·i·cism  /ə'setə,sɪzəm/ noun [noncount]
▪ religious asceticism

ag·ile  /ædʒəl/ adjective

[more agile; most agile] 1 : able to move quickly and easily
▪ She is the most agile [=nimble] athlete on the team. ▪ Leopards are very fast and agile. ▪ a car with agile handling [=a car that moves quickly and smoothly when the steering wheel is turned]

2 : quick, smart, and clever

▪ an agile mind ▪ an agile writer ▪ an agile thinker

— ag·ile·ly adverb

▪ The cat jumped agilely out of the way.

— agil·i·ty  /əˈdʒɪləti/ noun [noncount]

▪ the agility of a champion gymnast ▪ He has the agility of a mountain goat. [=he is very agile] ▪ mental agility

au·da·cious  /ɑˈdeɪʃəs/ adjective

[more audacious; most audacious] : very confident and daring : very bold and surprising or shocking

▪ They have audacious plans for the new school. ▪ This is her most audacious film so far. ▪ She made an audacious decision to quit her job. ▪ shockingly audacious behavior

— au·da·cious·ly adverb

▪ He audaciously disregarded all of their concerns.

— au·da·cious·ness noun [noncount]

▪ the audaciousness [= (more commonly) audacity] of their plans

aus·pi·cious  /ɑˈspɪʃəs/ adjective

[more auspicious; most auspicious] formal : showing or suggesting that future success is likely

▪ It was an auspicious [=favorable, promising] time to open a new business. ▪ His acclaimed first novel was an auspicious debut. — opposite [inauspicious](#)

— aus·pi·cious·ly adverb

— aus·pi·cious·ness noun [noncount]

al·le·vi·ate  /əˈliːviːeɪt/ verb

al·le·vi·ates; al·le·vi·at·ed; al·le·vi·at·ing

[+ obj] : to reduce the pain or trouble of (something) : to make (something) less painful, difficult, or severe

▪ The doctor tried to alleviate [=relieve] her symptoms/suffering. ▪ finding ways to alleviate stress ▪ The new tunnel should alleviate [=lessen, reduce] traffic on the bridge. ▪ government programs that are intended to alleviate [=reduce] poverty

— al·le·vi·a·tion  /əˈliːviːeɪʃən/ noun [noncount]

▪ the alleviation of suffering/poverty

bick·er  /ˈbɪkə/ verb

bick·ers; bick·ered; bick·er·ing

[no obj] : to argue in a way that is annoying about things that are not important

▪ She is always bickering with her mother. ▪ They bickered about/over how to decorate the room.

— bickering noun [noncount]

▪ I can't stand their constant bickering.

cir·cum·spect  /ˈsəˌkəmˌspekt/ adjective

[more circumspect; most circumspect] formal : thinking carefully about possible risks before doing or saying something

▪ They are circumspect [=cautious] in all their business dealings.

— cir·cum·spec·tion  /ˌsəˌkəmˌspekʃən/ noun [noncount]

▪ a scholar known for her circumspection

— cir·cum·spect·ly  /ˈsəˌkəmˌspektli/ adverb

coax  /ˈkoʊks/ verb

coax·es; coax·ed; coax·ing

[+ obj] 1 : to influence or persuade (a person or animal) to do something by talking in a gentle and friendly way

▪ It took almost an hour to coax the cat down from the tree. — often + into ▪ He wanted to stay home, but I coaxed him into going out. ▪ Can we coax her into singing? — sometimes followed by to + verb ▪ The ad coaxes customers to try the new product.

2 : to get (something) by talking in a gentle and friendly way

▪ She tried to coax a raise from her boss. ▪ He was unable to coax an answer out of her.

3 : to cause (something) to do something by making a careful and continual effort

▪ He coaxed the fire to burn by blowing on it. ▪ The plant is difficult to coax into bloom.

— coaxing noun [noncount]

▪ He agreed to go after a little gentle coaxing.

com·mo·tion  /kə'moʊʃən/ noun

: noisy excitement and confusion [noncount] ▪ I went outside to see what all the commotion [=hubbub] was about. [singular] ▪ There was a sudden commotion when the actress entered the restaurant.

con·no·ta·tion  /,kɑ:nə'teɪʃən/ noun

plural con·no·ta·tions

[count] : an idea or quality that a word makes you think about in addition to its meaning

▪ a word with negative/positive connotations ▪ For many people, the word “fat” has negative connotations. ▪ The word “childlike” has connotations of innocence. — compare [denotation](#)

con·jec·ture  /kən'dʒektʃə/ noun

plural con·jec·tures

formal : an opinion or idea formed without proof or sufficient evidence : [guess](#) [count] ▪ The biography includes conjectures about the writer's earliest ambitions. ▪ a conjecture about the extent of the injury [noncount] ▪ Your plan is based on (nothing more than) conjecture. ▪ Most of the book is conjecture, not fact. ▪ The criminal's motive remains a matter of conjecture. [=people can only guess about the criminal's motive; no one knows the criminal's motive]

— con·jec·tur·al  /kən'dʒektʃərəl/ adjective [more conjectural; most conjectural]

▪ Most of the book is conjectural.

²conjecture verb

conjectures; conjectured; conjecturing

formal : to form an opinion or idea without proof or sufficient evidence [+ obj] ▪ Some have conjectured that the distant planet could sustain life. [no obj] ▪ We only conjecture about his motives.

crum·ble  /'krʌmbəl/ verb

crum·bles; crum·bled; crum·bling

1 [+ obj] : to break (something) into small pieces

▪ Crumble the cookies into small bits. ▪ The recipe calls for the herbs to be crumbled.

2 [no obj] : to separate into many small pieces : to fall apart

▪ The arch had crumbled [=disintegrated] under the weight of all those stones. ▪ bones so old they had crumbled to dust ▪ crumbling buildings/monuments/walls

3 [no obj] : to break down completely : to stop functioning

▪ Peace talks between the two parties have crumbled. [=collapsed] ▪ She was extremely depressed after her marriage crumbled. ▪ their crumbling marriage

that's the way the cookie crumbles

²crumble noun

plural crumbles

1 crumbles [plural] US : small pieces of something that has been crumbled
▪ crumbles of blue cheese

2 [count, noncount] chiefly Brit : ²[crisp](#) 2
▪ an apple crumble

det·ri·men·tal  /detrə'mentl/ adjective

[more detrimental; most detrimental] formal : causing damage or injury

▪ The detrimental [=harmful] effects of overeating are well known. — often + to ▪ She argues that watching too much TV is detrimental to a child's intellectual and social development.

— det·ri·men·tal·ly adverb

di·late  /'daɪ,leɪt/ verb

di·lates; di·lat·ed; di·lat·ing

: to become larger or wider [no obj] ▪ The drug causes the blood vessels to dilate. ▪ During labor, a woman's cervix will dilate to about 10 centimeters. [+ obj] ▪ The drug dilates the blood vessels.

dilate on/upon [phrasal verb]

dilate on/upon (something) formal : to talk about (a subject) for a long time

▪ We spent a long evening listening to him dilate on the need for tax relief.

— dilated adjective [more dilated; most dilated]

▪ dilated pupils

— di·la·tion  /dar'leɪʃən/ noun [noncount]

▪ dilation of the arteries

dis·crep·an·cy  /dɪ'skreɪpənsi/ noun

plural dis·crep·an·cies

: a difference especially between things that should be the same [count] ▪ Discrepancies in the firm's financial statements led to an investigation. ▪ There were discrepancies between their accounts of the accident. [noncount] ▪ There is some discrepancy [=disagreement] between the results of the two studies.

elate  /ɪ'leɪt/ verb

elates; elat·ed; elat·ing

[+ obj] : to make (someone) very happy and excited

▪ The discovery has elated researchers.

— ela·tion  /ɪ'leɪʃən/ noun [noncount]

▪ her feelings of elation at being chosen for the job

es·o·ter·ic  /ɛsə'terɪk/ adjective

[more esoteric; most esoteric] 1 : only taught to or understood by members of a special group

▪ esoteric knowledge : hard to understand ▪ esoteric subjects/concepts

2 : limited to a small number of people

▪ esoteric pursuits ▪ esoteric religious sects

— es·o·ter·i·cal·ly  /ɛsə'terɪkli/ adverb

griev·ance  /'gri:vəns/ noun

plural griev·anc·es

1 : a feeling of having been treated unfairly [noncount] ▪ He has a deep sense of grievance against his former employer. [count] ▪ She has been nursing a grievance all week.

2 [count] : a reason for complaining or being unhappy with a situation

- In the petition, the students listed their many grievances against the university administration.

3 [count] : a statement in which you say you are unhappy or not satisfied with something

- The union has filed a formal grievance [=complaint], accusing the company of unfair labor practices. ▪ Several customers came to the front desk to air their grievances.
-

grim·ace /'grɪməs/ noun

plural grim·ac·es

[count] : a facial expression in which your mouth and face are twisted in a way that shows disgust, disapproval, or pain

- The patient made/gave a painful grimace as the doctor examined his wound.

— grimace verb, grimaces; grimaced; grimac·ing [no obj]

- The patient grimaced in pain when his wound was touched.
-

hag·gard /'hægəd/ adjective

[more haggard; most haggard] : looking very thin and tired especially from great hunger, worry, or pain

- She looked tired and haggard. ▪ We were shocked by his haggard appearance.