



Soldiers struggle with body composition and weight control. The Army needs to change its approach to training and educating about these issues. Failing to implement more effective nutritional training strategies will result in more resources allocated to combating obesity rather than increasing Soldier lethality. (U.S. Army photo by K. Kassens)

Fueling the Fight: Lethality and Nutrition

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The Army is the premier fighting force for sustained ground combat operations. However, Soldiers struggle with body composition and weight control, and the Army needs to change its approach to training and educating about these issues.

Studies show that higher body fat in Soldiers contributes to increased health risks and decreased combat performance and readiness (Anderson et al., 2014). Failing to implement more effective nutritional training strategies will result in more resources allocated to combating obesity rather than increasing Soldier lethality.

History

The Army's Body Composition Program was born in the 1940s during the World War II draft. The program primarily focused on underweight draftees and volunteers who were malnourished, diagnosed with tuberculosis, or who had parasitic diseases (Friedl, 1992).

As the nation came out of World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, the Army noticed that Soldiers were increasing in body size due to modern medicine and overnutrition.

In 1986, the Army developed Army Regulation (AR) 600-9, *The Army Body Composition Program*,

which initiated the U.S. Army Weight Control Program. This regulation went unchanged until June 2013, when it became the Army Body Composition Program (ABCP). The most recent significant change to the regulation was in July 2019 (Department of the Army [DA], 2019). (2025 has seen further modifications, such as removals and verbiage updates.)

The Army does not have a regulation specifically tailored or designated to nutrition. The latest update to Field Manual (FM) 7-22, *Holistic Health and Fitness* (H2F), however, did incorporate nutrition as one of its

five domains. The regulation places minimal emphasis on the domain: 17 pages (approximately 7%) of the 244-page field manual pertain to nutritional readiness (DA, 2020).

Nutrition is the most significant contributing factor to body composition, performance, and athlete recovery (Lecovin, 2021). Researchers estimate that the percentage of overweight service members grew from 10% to more than 21% over the last decade (Myers, 2023). This increase presents a major problem for unit readiness and the Army.

Problem

The issue of overweight Soldiers, due to a lack of proper nutritional training, leads to two major problems: increased risk of injury, illness, or disease; and decreased unit readiness.



AT LEFT: A Soldier receives a standard tape test as part of the Army Body Composition Program (ABCP) at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, Oct. 18, 2021. Originally focused on underweight recruits, the program now responds to rising rates of overweight Soldiers in the force. (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Lilliana Fraser)

BELOW: The issue of overweight Soldiers, due to a lack of proper nutritional training, leads to two major problems: increased risk of injury, illness, or disease; and decreased unit readiness. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that, on average, the military spends more than \$1.5 billion a year to remedy servicemembers' illnesses and injuries connected to increased weight or obesity. (Department of Defense photo by Jason W. Edwards)





Online training is a valuable avenue for educating Soldiers about nutrition and reinforcing the importance of a balanced diet. These sessions can offer options tailored to dietary restrictions and serve as annual refreshers to build on foundational knowledge. (U.S. Army photo by Emily Klikenborg)

Obesity is the leading factor in Soldier injuries and medical discharges (Satter, 2023). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that, on average, the military spends more than 1.5 billion dollars per year to remedy servicemembers' illnesses and injuries connected to increased weight or obesity. Additionally, overweight servicemembers cost the military more than 650,000 missed workdays (CDC, 2024).

These facts directly impact unit readiness. Soldiers miss critical training that could make them more proficient in their military occupational specialty (MOS), thus reducing unit readiness and operational effectiveness.

Many Soldiers make dietary selections based on convenience. Often, hectic work schedules factor into their decisions. Most meal options on posts, camps, and stations are fast food, offering low prices and high convenience. The military intends for these to be occasional selections. Unfortunately, because Soldiers aren't educated and trained on the importance of nutritional decisions, they frequently opt for these foods out of convenience.

Prevention

The Army needs to train Soldiers on the importance of nutritional decisions and the implications of an unbalanced diet. Army regulation mandates Soldiers attend nutritional classes at the Army Wellness Center (AWC) upon failing to meet the standard of the ABCP program (DA, 2019). This approach means Soldiers only receive nutritional classes as a reactive measure to

failing to meet the Army standards.

The Army needs to evaluate potential options that will act as preventative measures rather than reactive ones. It already has preventative training for other priorities. One example: The Sexual Harassment Assault Response Prevention (SHARP) program diligently aims to educate and train Soldiers on how to prevent and intervene in situations before sexual harassment or assault starts. The Army should do the same for nutrition.

Education and Training

The Army needs to address multiple facets of the nutritional education gap. Viewing nutritional education through a similar lens as weapons training could help. The Army should establish the basics on initial entry and then build advanced educational concepts as Soldiers progress through the military.

This concept would introduce Soldiers to nutritional principles early on and build on that foundation. The Basic Combat Training Program of Instruction (POI) doesn't provide such training. The Army should take two hours of POI from the eight-hour history POI to introduce Soldiers to nutritional basics. Additionally, the Army can mandate Soldiers to refresh certain training principles through online training.

Online training is another avenue for educating Soldiers about nutrition. Training could be preference-based and provide options based on Soldiers' dietary restrictions

and availability. It would act as annual refresher training to reinforce the importance of a balanced diet. The next step would be building on the basics and structuring subordinates' dietary training.

The final step should be implementing nutritional training into Professional Military Education (PME). Leaders must attend professional development courses to be eligible for promotion to the next rank.

The three cohorts of enlisted, warrant, and commissioned officers would all benefit from this knowledge at their PME. This training would provide Soldiers with tools to structure an effective diet for subordinates and themselves at different life stages. These classes could use guest instructors from

H2F teams to ensure professionals in the nutritional and coaching fields lead the training.



Army regulation mandates Soldiers attend nutrition classes at the Army Wellness Center (AWC) upon failing to meet the standard of the ABCP program. This approach means Soldiers only receive nutrition classes as a reactive measure to failing to meet Army standards. (U.S. Army photo by Maria Yager)

Conclusion

The Army needs to make a change and focus its efforts to address the issue of Soldiers' increased weight and body composition. Simple changes to how it trains and educates Soldiers on nutrition will save billions of dollars, time, and — most importantly — the forces' well-being and readiness.

Soldiers who make wise dietary choices and maintain balanced diets recover faster and have increased performance. They will create a more lethal and capable fighting force, ready to deploy, fight, and win in large-scale combat operations. ■

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