‘Obese’, or just ‘very overweight’?

Teacher’s notes

See the Teaching idea on ‘Using concordance lines’ for general suggestions relevant to this resource. The concordance lines used here are taken from: http://corpus.leeds.ac.uk/.

Level

Suitable for fairly advanced adult students, preferably living in the UK. To make the worksheet easier, the text at the beginning can be omitted. The text is useful because it contextualises the discussion of these particular words, but instead you could just summarise the story for the students and tell them that it was widely reported in the UK.

Timing

You can spend ten minutes on this or over half an hour, depending on the students’ interest.

Learning focus

To encourage students to explore the concepts of synonymy and collocation.

Sometimes words that have roughly the same meaning can be used interchangeably, but more often they cannot. The term ‘collocation’ means simply that words tend to occur in the company of other words - you say a golden opportunity but not a golden chance; you say a wide range but not a fat range. The concordance lines in this worksheet were chosen because they show the typical ways in which the central words collocate. The lines also show that some words may have positive meanings and some may have more ‘neutral’ or negative meanings, so you say might say that someone is pleasantly plump but not pleasantly obese.

Lead-in suggestion

You could write the word fat on the board and elicit synonyms from students, but avoid exploring the differences in meaning at this stage.

Suggested answers

See the end of the resource.
This is part of a story that was discussed on the PM blog on 4 August 2008. (PM is a BBC Radio 4 news and discussion programme.) It was also reported in all the major newspapers on the same day.

... Ministers want to refrain from using the word ‘obese’ when telling parents their child is overweight, under plans announced today. The Department of Health is urging all primary care trusts (PCTs) to automatically tell parents their child’s height and weight as part of a national measuring programme.

But ministers do not want the word ‘obese’ to be used in the letters home after research showed it ‘shuts people down’. Instead, the heaviest children should be referred to as being ‘very overweight’, they said. ... “We have not banned the word ‘obese’, but we have chosen not to use it ...”

(by Jane Kirby, Press Association Health Correspondent)

**Awareness activities**

1. Read the text and make sure you understand the main meaning. Try to summarize what the report is about in one or two sentences.

2. Now look at the two blocks of lines below. They look very strange at first. This is because they are concordance lines and are cut off at the beginning and end – many of them are not complete sentences. They show the different ways in which the words obese and overweight have been used in real texts on the internet.

   The lines are not connected with each other – you should read each one separately. They all show the word obese or overweight at the centre of the line, and then a few other words to the left and to the right. In most cases you can tell roughly what the rest of the sentence might be about. (If you were using the computer yourself, you could ‘expand’ each line and read the whole sentence or paragraph from the original text.)

3. Look carefully at the words to the left and right of obese and overweight and try to make a few statements about them. For example:
   - Obese is often an adjective coming before a noun, in 8 out of 15 lines.
   - These nouns are always people, e.g. adult, children.
   - In these lines, people use overweight to describe themselves, but not obese.

4. With a partner, discuss both blocks of lines again, and try to decide when it is possible to use obese in the overweight lines, and the other way round. Just write down some ideas, then discuss them with your teacher.

5. Read the text again and talk to a partner about the government’s decision to use one word but not the other. Do you agree, or do you think the government is just being silly?
### 'Obese’, or just ‘very overweight’?

#### Obese

1. and 20% of people are clinically obese. A further 45% of men and
2. of girls and 18% of boys were obese. In 1991, in comparison, 24%
3. Children today are more obese, less active, more suicidal,
4. One third of Americans are now obese - twice as many as in 1990 -
5. a 25% chance of becoming an obese adult. An obese teenager has
6. a standard reduced-fat diet in obese children. Such a diet focuses
7. and high blood pressure in obese children and adolescents. Of
8. And adolescents who are obese have poorer health than other
9. selected 10 normal-weight and 10 obese men and women for the study,
10. children and adolescents are now obese or overweight, the study
11. compromise. If practical, obese patients should lose weight
12. are based on a study of 100 obese people, who ate or drank
13. flap as that person moves. An obese person will not be active.
14. According to Ayurveda the obese persons are more prone to diseases such
15. grapefruit helps people who are obese to lose weight, a study has indicated.

#### Overweight

1. If you are often tired and also overweight, find out why you are sleepy.
2. If you are seriously overweight, it can be quite tricky for you
3. not happy falling pregnant whilst overweight, so she joined Weight Watchers
4. if they think that you are very overweight, they will ask the hospital
5. was associated with being unfit, overweight, having high blood pressure
6. I am only a few pounds overweight, why should I bother?
7. I’m 16 and very overweight. I weigh 200 pounds and
8. meat and fish, but don’t get overweight. Take plenty of exercise. The
9. Even though I knew I was overweight I didn’t feel unattractive
10. The number of obese and overweight children in the UK is growing
11. after a moment. A slightly overweight man whose hair was receding
12. balanced. I often find that overweight people can choose healthy
13. that even being a few pounds overweight significantly increases your
14. Many more children are overweight today than in the past. There
15. on the tennis court. Being overweight will reduce speed and stamina
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Practice activities

1. Look at the two blocks of lines below. In each block, the missing word is the same, just as in the examples you have seen. The word plump fits into one block, and the word fat fits into the other. Which is which?

   Block A: ____________________________

   Block B: ____________________________

2. With a partner, discuss the reasons for your decision. Then report your conclusions to the class.

3. Compare fat and plump with obese and overweight. Are there any differences between the two pairs?

4. Look up the adjective meanings of the two words in a learner’s dictionary and say whether the definitions reflect the facts that you have observed.

Block A

1. I’m not ugly and I’m not ______. I’m smart and I’m a nice person.

2. later life William became very ______. In 1087 William was told

3. Does beer really make you ______? Or does it just make you tired, lazy?

4. whether a person is tall, short, thin, ______, smart, or not smart,

5. And they serve big, ______, tasty-looking chips. I’m hungry but

6. Think of an old witch, wrinkly, ______, ugly, spotty, smelly, but very happy

7. to animals when they get too ______ and too old? Young Charlie

8. bullied at school, people called me ______ and ugly, and I was looking for

9. much chocolate you’re going to be ______ and unhealthy. Find out the facts

10. problems later in life. A ______ baby is not a healthy baby

11. I was always big, I was a ______ boy at school. I had an early growth

12. alcohol on his breath. With his ______ fingers he sorted the grubby money

13. Honestly you don’t look ______ in that dress, you look great and

14. advantages. It’s true that a ______ person will feel more comfortable if

15. complaining about her body, how ______ she felt. I looked at her.
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Block B

1. was in her forties, and adorably . He had expected her to be
2. an appetizer - deliciously and crunchy fried oysters
3. more serious. I’m pleasingly and very loving. Like to go
4. rich brown, luminous skin and attractive features. Mr
5. awkwardly and studied her brown hands, the pale skin on
6. My goal is to stay enough to keep those wrinkles away
7. There were short, girls, there were tall, slim girls,
8. the middle-sized one. She had legs and short brown braids
9. ran away, stamping with her little legs over the carpets,
10. the driveway and saw a rather old guy with a moustache and a
11. one of them pointed to a pigeon in a tree, and the
12. Resting on a short, sofa in his dressing room at
13. visibly overweight. She had thighs, a double chin, and
14. The raspberries aren’t very this year. Everything’s
15. a long, dark corridor where a young woman is holding a baby
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Teacher’s key: suggestions and answers

Awareness activities

Here is a list of statements that you could make about the lines for *obese* and *overweight*. You and the students may think of more, but stop the exercise as soon as they seem to lose interest.

- *Obese* is often an adjective coming before a noun, in 8 out of 15 lines.
- *Overweight* also comes before a noun in 3 out of 15 lines, but more often it comes after the verb ‘be’.
- The nouns following both adjectives are always people, e.g. *adult*, *children*.
- People use *overweight* to describe themselves, e.g. in lines 6 and 7, but they don’t use *obese* like this. In other lines, the ‘reader’ is addressed as *you*, e.g. line 1, which again is more ‘personal’.
- Many of the collocates of *obese* are connected with health, diet, and medical conditions. Many are to do with statistics - how many people are obese - and research studies of obesity. *Obese* is a more formal and ‘objective’ word than *overweight*. *Overweight* is also used in connection with health, diet, and statistics, but less often than *obese*.
- Well-informed students may know that a person is considered to be obese if they have a body mass index of over 30, so it has a technical meaning. *Overweight* is sometimes used in a technical way as well, to describe someone with a body mass index of 25-30, but it also has the less precise meaning shown in some of the lines.
- *Overweight* is used after nouns like *pounds*, *kilos* etc, e.g. line 6: *I am only a few pounds overweight*, and in line 13, but you can’t say *a few pounds obese*. (See note to *overweight* below.)

A useful way of looking at the difference between the two words is to see which lines are ‘interchangeable’ - where can *obese* be replaced by *overweight*, and the other way round?

- **Obese**: In many of the *obese* lines you could use *overweight* instead, though many statements (e.g. line 2) would be factually incorrect. However, *overweight* could not go in line 1, as *clinically obese* is a fixed phrase, showing that the technical meaning is being used. *Overweight* could not go in line 10 either, because it is already there: *obese or overweight*, but it sounds fine in many of the lines.

- **Overweight**: In the *overweight* lines, you cannot often use *obese* - it does not ‘travel’ so well. In line 2, *seriously overweight* is a common collocation but *seriously obese* is rarely used. In lines 4 and 5, *very overweight* is another common collocation, and this is the phrase that ministers are advising Primary Care Trusts to use. The same applies to *slightly overweight* - you don’t often say *slightly obese*. In other words, *overweight* is a ‘scale’ adjective - it can be modified by adverbs such as slightly and very - whereas *obese* is a limit adjective. In lines 6, 7, and 9 the speaker is talking about him/herself, and *obese* would sound too formal, and in 6 and 13 the expression is *a few pounds overweight* (not *obese* - see above).
Practice activities

1. Block A: fat
   Block B: plump

2. Below are some of the things you could say about the differences between fat and plump. The students will probably work the answer out very easily if they have one or two of these intuitions.

   - Fat is a very direct word, so you might use it about yourself (e.g. line 11) or to tell someone they are not fat. It often has a negative meaning, e.g. in lines 1, 6, and 8 it is used with ugly, and in lines 9 and 10 with unhealthy and not healthy.

   - Because it is negative, you often find lines with too fat = ‘excessively fat’, as in line 7. Make sure the students know that too doesn’t mean the same as ‘very’ (a common error). Too plump does not often occur.

   - Plump is sometimes used with negative meaning as well, e.g. Block B, line 13, but it often has a positive meaning, e.g. line 1 adorably plump, line 2 deliciously plump, line 3 pleasingly plump, and line 4 plump attractive features.

   - People often say that they ‘feel fat’ (line 15) - whether they are fat or not - but they don’t say they ‘feel plump’ (collocation again).

   - Line 4 is a list of ‘opposites’: tall / short, thin / fat, smart / not-smart. Opposites are another aspect of collocation, and thin is usually paired with fat, not plump. In Block B, line 7, plump and slim are paired as ‘opposites’.

3. Here are some differences between the two pairs of words, obese / overweight and fat / plump.

   - Both fat and plump are often used to describe parts of someone’s body: fat fingers, plump brown hands, plump legs, plump thighs. So they have a more general meaning than obese or overweight, which are not used this way.

   - Both fat and plump are used about food and other objects, e.g. fat, tasty-looking chips; deliciously plump and crunchy fried oysters; a short plump sofa; the raspberries aren’t very plump. Plump has a positive meaning when it is used about food items, and fat is usually positive as well in this context.

   - Obese and overweight are often used with technical or ‘neutral’ meanings, but if you use plump or fat to describe someone, you are usually giving your personal opinion, or being rude, or criticizing yourself!

Further activities

You could come back to your synonym list from the lead-in and discuss other words that can have similar meanings to the four in the exercises, e.g. chubby, well-built, chunky, stout, big, heavy, large. For instance, the word heaviest is used with ‘neutral’ meaning in the PM blog text. If possible, find some corpus examples.