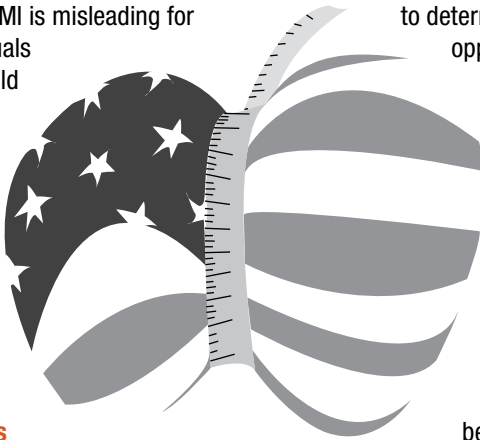


# TIPPING THE SCALES: WEIGHING THE BARIATRIC FURNITURE MARKET



**The nation's scales** are moving higher and higher because of yet another battle that is seizing the country: Obesity. Americans seem to keep growing, and growing, and growing. Unhealthy diets full of high fat and processed foods, as well as our sedentary lifestyles, are partially to blame. Over the past 20 years, America has moved through the “couch potato” syndrome to the “PlayStation® nation.” Children are often found camped out in front of the TV or computer instead of being outside playing baseball or riding bikes. It’s ironic that the problem of obesity is emerging so strongly in a world where hunger is such a major problem in many countries. As global efforts to reduce hunger continue, many countries are looking for ways to fight obesity by educating the public on nutrition and by developing programs to increase physical activity for students, as well as adults. In the United States alone, at least one-third of the population is unhealthily overweight—that’s over 72 million people!

**Being overweight** is one thing, but obesity is quite another. Whether a person is overweight or obese is technically determined by using Body Mass Index (BMI) to measure the amount of body fat calculated from their weight and height. Adults with a BMI over 25 and under 30 are considered overweight, while adults with a BMI of 30 or more are considered obese. It should be noted that BMI is only a guide and does not always accurately apply to measuring a persons' body fat. For instance, BMI is misleading for certain individuals because it would overestimate body composition for pregnant women or for athletes, such as football players or weight lifters.



**Obese persons** store a lot of extra fat that can cause unwelcome health conditions. Some of these include high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, heart disease and increased risk of stroke. In addition to the negative health conditions that excess weight presents, it also impacts quality of life. People who are severely obese might have difficulty in performing simple everyday tasks such as walking up a flight of stairs or tying their shoes. Obese people may also have trouble getting in and out of their car, sitting in a movie theater, using public transportation, or sitting in standard furniture. There is also evidence that these large individuals are discriminated against in the job market as well as being passed over for promotions and advancements at work.

**If you are not** familiar with the term “bariatric”, it refers to the branch of medicine—not just surgical procedures, as most people think—that deals with the causes, prevention and treatment of obesity. The Franklin Furniture Institute sponsored a project conducted by researchers at Mississippi State University to analyze the bariatric market for the furniture industry. Through research into bariatrics, as well as through the actual testing of furniture components, these researchers were able to determine potential challenges,

opportunities, and strategies for the bariatric furniture market.

The following information is a review of the statistics and findings of the project.

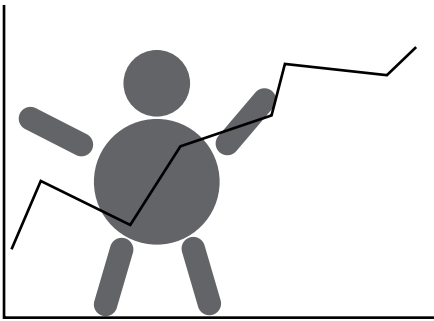
**As the population** of the severely obese increases, so too does the need for bariatric furniture and equipment. As previously mentioned, during the past 20 years, there has been a steady increase in obesity among adults in the U.S. This wave of

overweight individuals includes Americans of all ages, sexes, racial/ethnic groups and educational levels.

## ONE NATION, OVERWEIGHT

Obesity was found to be more common in groups with low incomes. However, the obesity epidemic is not limited to the United States alone. The global trend of obesity has also reached other countries such as China, Germany, Russia, and Australia. So what does all this discussion about overweight and obese people in the world have to do with the furniture business? Think about it. These people could be your next target market!

**Bariatric furniture**, or furniture engineered for heavy people, does not leave room for careless workmanship or poor quality materials. Comfort, functionality, safety and durability should be equally important in all bariatric furniture. But obviously, furniture varies in the amount of weight it can support. Being able to fit into a chair without having to worry about breaking it or getting stuck in it is where the manufacturer's considerations will make a difference. Standard furniture may be insufficient in both size and weight capacity. Structures and mechanisms must be developed that will support bariatric loads in items such as bedding and seating to accommodate obese individuals. People come in all shapes and sizes and so should their furniture!



## THE WEIGHT OF EVIDENCE

**How do you REALLY know** if a sofa or chair has been designed to support a certain weight limit? There is a real need for design, strength and testing performance standards of bariatric furniture, based on the findings of the Mississippi State University researchers. None exist! Bariatric weight load is usually between 500 to 700 pounds—and seating capacity can go over a 1,000 pounds. And just because a product says it can hold 500 lbs. does not mean it will function properly with heavy use. Although there are no standard regulations that control or identify bariatric furniture design and weight capacity, furniture can be tested using a variety of means. One way

is to use a dedicated testing center, while another is to test products on-site at the manufacturing facility. However, without established standards, companies must assign loading levels at their own discretion, leaving the doors open for false claims of quality.

## Scientists in Mississippi State University's Forest and Wildlife Research Center

have designed a prototype frame to acquire live data on seating loads to measure human impact on the entire furniture frame. This realistic loading of chairs that simulates human sitting is a much better method than traditional machine cycle testing to ensure that furniture is capable of functioning properly. BIFMA and GSA furniture testing regimens focus on individual areas instead of testing the entire frame. Simply making seats wider on bariatric chairs does not guarantee that the furniture will withstand the extra pressure and weight. The frame of a chair is its principle source of strength. MSU's Department of Forest Products is currently testing and measuring loads in different areas using human subjects to determine loading measurements and dimensions of bariatric seating. The dimension targets developed in these tests were a 19" seat height, an arm height of 25-1/2", a seat width of 31" and a 20-1/2" seat depth. Think of the pressure placed on the arms alone of bariatric chairs! Chair arms are like crutches for people who need to push on the arms to get up from the chair. The arms would have to be strong enough to handle both vertical and horizontal pressure. The goal of the ongoing chair loading test is to monitor and record as many people as possible from a large group of overweight individuals as they sit in the instrumented chair.

## WEIGHS AND MEANS

Although still in the growth stage, the market for bariatric furniture is currently estimated to be \$400 million. Companies that do not currently offer bariatric furniture might want to consider entering this marketplace. It is likely that the bariatric market could expand as quickly as the nation's waistlines. How does one prepare to meet the challenges of accommodating obese individuals? The best way is to look at the unique needs of these individuals and keep in mind that products must be able to withstand extreme force and pressure. For assistance with design issues, consider the Department of Forest Products at Mississippi State University or other testing facilities. Information could also be obtained from home and health care providers and supply distributors.

Scientists in Mississippi State University's Forest and Wildlife Research Center have designed a prototype frame to acquire live data on seating loads to measure human impact on the entire furniture frame.

According to the MSU researchers, it's not just the low-income neighborhoods who are packing on the pounds with super-sized fries, burger and triple-thick shakes. The greatest target market for bariatric furniture is adults between the ages of 40 and 59 with BMI's over 30 and at an income level of at least \$50,000. Why? Although lower income groups were found to be more obese than higher income groups, there's no federal financial assistance available for low-income people to purchase bariatric home furnishings. And because of its association with a medical condition, bariatrics has basically been viewed as a medical institution franchise. More recently, though, case goods and commercial furniture manufacturers have developed

product lines to take advantage of the growing bariatric market

### Of 38 medical supply companies

contacted by MSU researchers, 19 companies reported the sale of bariatric products, but few of them had sold any bariatric furniture. The majority of these companies had seen an increase in bariatric requests in recent years. Even though most companies were not interested in inventorying bariatric furniture in their

stores, these same companies did express an interest in providing products on an individual customer request basis and having the product shipped directly to the customer. The majority of these companies also indicated that they believe there is a real

need for retail bariatric furniture. The MSU researchers defined the bariatric market as one with an opportunity for furniture manufacturers to enter the market as a niche, as there is a limited number of bariatric products offered in the retail and home furnishings markets.

Companies interested in entering any new market, and especially the bariatric furniture market, should conduct a SWOT (Strength, Weakness, Opportunity and Threat) analysis as a means of identifying capabilities of internal resources, external threats and key success factors needed to provide superior customer satisfaction and company profitability. As a rule, strengths and weaknesses are internal; opportunities and threats are external. The purpose of SWOT is to identify strengths, minimize weaknesses, develop and take advantage of opportunities, and prevent threats before they materialize.

**For a bariatric furniture** SWOT analysis, consider that the obese do want to call attention to their need for a specially-sized item. At the same time, the obese individual wants to approach the item with confidence that the manufacturer has carefully designed the item for the specific use. This presents unique challenges in product design, marketing and product delivery. What's more, bariatric furniture that is functional should also be attractive and blend well with other furnishings. It must also be marketed in a way that protects the dignity of an obese individual. Customers need to be able to purchase with confidence. In addition, it was found that the most effective advertising method in reaching these bariatric customers is in their own home. This could include newspaper, television, and magazine, as well as online internet advertising.

**If your company** makes the decision to enter the bariatric market, you might want to consider promoting the products on your web site. Research shows that consumers turn to the web to research a product, especially for big ticket items such as durable goods. A company's web site is the easiest, most convenient place for a potential customer to find detailed information about a company and its products. One good source for companies and consumers to research bariatric products is through the online publication of Bariatric Times Buyers Guide ([www.BariatricTimes.com](http://www.BariatricTimes.com)). Sections on furniture, beds, chairs and seating are available to the public.

If you would like more information on bariatric furniture, contact  
director@ffi.msstate.edu.

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## **BIG BUSINESS, BIG OPPORTUNITY**

To summarize, there are unique characteristics to consider in the bariatric market, or in any market, whether in a company's product design, its marketing approach, or the delivery of the product. One key to success is an understanding of consumer needs. Identify the products that obese consumers want and research the quality of life characteristics important to them.

The market for bariatric seating is not limited to larger individuals. Some people just look for comfort in larger furniture; they like big, plush chairs to relax in and they like to sleep in king-sized beds. And who knows, the "plus-size" population could dictate marketing trends in the years to come. Look at the clothing industry—it has changed to accommodate individual needs and special conditions. There are specialized lines for brides, petite women, expectant mothers and plus-sized apparel.

Today's consumers expect and demand customized products that fit their income and lifestyle. Because markets are now global, as opposed to local, providers of goods and services have to be all things to all consumers. Furniture manufacturers have a great opportunity ahead by filling the need for durable, quality, attractive products to a growing segment of our population by focusing on the bariatric market.