



American Institute for  
Cancer Research®



# LIVING FOR LOWER CANCER RISK IN THE US, 2016:

WHO IS, WHO ISN'T—  
AND WHY THEY'RE NOT

An American Institute for Cancer Research Survey Report

## INTRODUCTION

The American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR) is a non-profit cancer research and education organization that studies how diet, physical activity and weight affect cancer risk. Our research shows that nearly one-third of the cases of the most common cancers in the US—about 340,000 cases every year—could be prevented if Americans ate diets high in a variety of plant foods and low in meat and dairy products, were physically active and avoided obesity.

February is National Cancer Prevention month in the US. Every February, AICR launches a national multimedia campaign to raise awareness of the links between everyday lifestyle choices and cancer risk. In preparation for February 2016, AICR commissioned this YouGov survey to ask Americans which cancer-protective behaviors they're currently engaging in and which they are not. To gauge the accuracy of these self-reported answers we compared them to the latest health statistics from government sources. We also asked those who said they weren't making the healthy choices that have been shown to lower risk to tell us why they weren't doing so.



## SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Most Americans aren't making the kind of everyday lifestyle choices that protect against cancer—yet many mistakenly believe they are. American men, in particular, tend to eat diets that are less cancer-protective than women, yet men are also less likely to feel the need to make healthy changes to their diet or activity level.

When asked to cite the most important obstacle that keeps them from adopting specific cancer-protective habits, Americans cite cost (healthy diet), time (regular physical activity) and difficulty (losing weight).



## Summary of Results, *Continued*

### **Diet**

- AICR recommends eating a plant-based diet. This means foods like vegetables, whole grains, beans and fruit should make up most (at least 2/3) of every meal plate, leaving less room (1/3 of the plate at most) for meat and dairy products.
- Only 23% of Americans say they currently achieve this meal model. Women (28%) are more likely than men (18%) to eat a cancer-protective diet.
- Overall, however, 77% of Americans report eating too much meat and too few plant foods to realize the cancer-protective benefits of AICR's recommended plant-based diet.
- Despite this, Americans in this survey seem perfectly content with the healthiness of their diets. Overall, seven out of ten say they consider their diets healthy, with 56% saying their diets were “somewhat healthy” and 14% “very healthy.”
- When those who said their diets were anything but “very healthy” are asked the most important reason why they aren't eating healthier, the top answer is “it costs too much money” (35%).
- Men are more likely than women to say the most important reason is that they don't feel a need to eat healthier (25% of men whose diets are not “very healthy” compared to just 10% of women in that category).



## Summary of Results, *Continued*

### ■ Physical Activity

- AICR recommends getting a minimum of 30 minutes of moderate physical activity every day for cancer protection.
- When asked about their activity level, over 2 in 5 of those surveyed (42%) claim they exceed 30 minutes of physical activity every day. (When that result is broken out by gender, over half of American men (52%) say they are getting more than 30 minutes of physical activity every day, compared to 33% of women.)
- Yet government statistics suggest these respondents are vastly over-reporting their activity. According to the President's Council on Fitness, Sports and Nutrition, less than 5% of American adults participate in 30 minutes of physical activity each day; only 1/3 of adults receive the government-recommended amount of physical activity each week.
- When those who say they do not achieve the 30-minute-per-day minimum for activity are asked the most important reason why they don't achieve it, 1 in 4 (25%) say they don't have the time.
- Men who don't achieve the 30-minute minimum are more likely than their women counterparts to say the most important reason for not doing so is that they do not feel a need to be more active: 21% of men compared to just 9% of women.



## Summary of Results, *Continued*

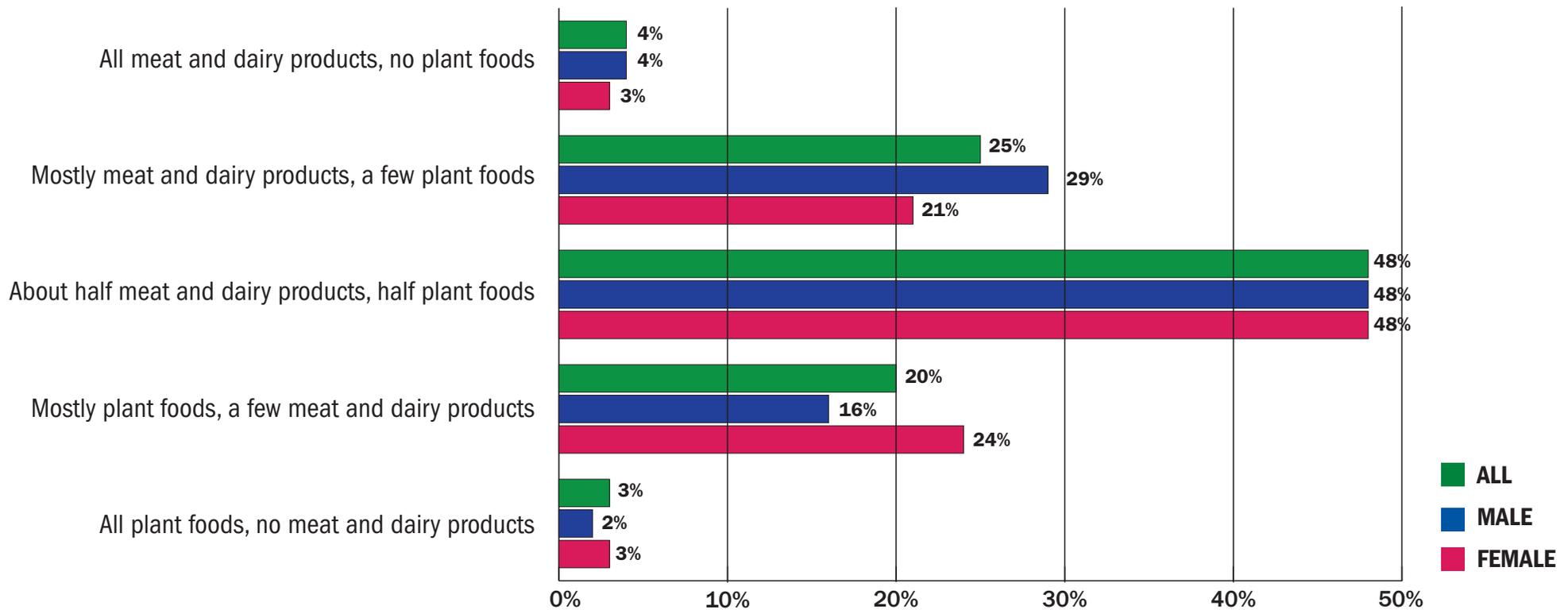
### ■ Weight

- AICR research has shown obesity to be a causative factor in ten different kinds of cancer. Aside from not smoking, avoiding overweight and obesity is the single most important thing Americans can do to lower their cancer risk.
- When asked about their current weight, 41% say they are overweight, and another 9% say they are obese.
- Yet government statistics tell another story: according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the percentage of Americans who are overweight and obese is 69%.
- When those who say they are overweight or obese in the AICR survey are asked the most important reason they haven't lost weight and kept it off, just over 1 in 5 (21%) say it is too difficult, and 13% say they don't have the time.



## THE SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. Which ONE, if any, of the following BEST describes your typical daily diet? By “plant foods” we mean foods such as fruits, vegetables, beans, carbohydrates, etc.



## THE SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. Which ONE, if any, of the following BEST describes your typical daily diet? By “plant foods” we mean foods such as fruits, vegetables, beans, carbohydrates, etc.

## AICR’s TAKE:

For cancer protection, AICR advises Americans to build meals around plant foods. Specifically, our New American Plate approach calls for at least 2/3 of every meal to consist of plant foods (whole grains, vegetables, fruits, beans) and 1/3 or less of animal products.

But only 20% of Americans say they eat *mostly* plant foods, while an additional 3% say they eat *only* plant foods. This means the remaining 77% of Americans—more than 3 out of 4—may be at higher risk for colorectal cancer in particular, as diets high in red and processed meat have been shown to be a cause of that disease.

This finding is in line with the Federal government’s National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) statistics, which show that 87% of Americans are eating fewer vegetables than the Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend and 75% are eating less fruit than the Dietary Guidelines recommend.

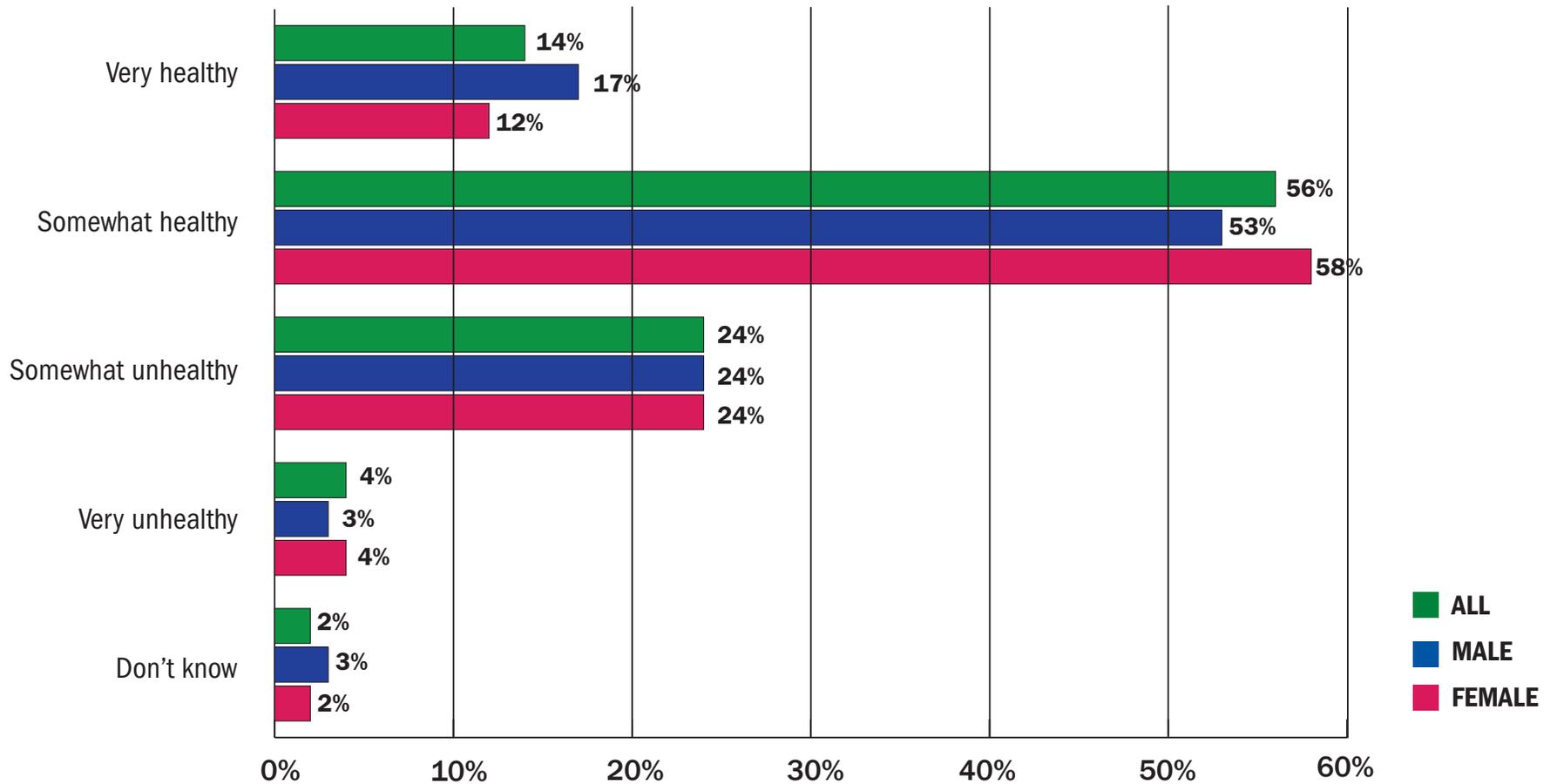
In our survey, men were markedly less likely to eat a cancer-protective diet: only 18% percent met the “mostly plant-based” standard, compared to 28% of women.

Together these figures reveal an America still clinging to the traditional “meat and potatoes” way of eating. At [prevent50.org](http://prevent50.org), Americans can find practical tools for adjusting their meals to include less meat and more of a wider variety of plant foods, which powerful anti-cancer protection.



## THE SURVEY QUESTIONS

2. How healthy or unhealthy do you consider your current diet to be?



## THE SURVEY QUESTIONS

2. How healthy or unhealthy to do you consider your current diet to be?

### AICR's TAKE:

Seventy percent of Americans rate their diets either “somewhat healthy” or “very healthy,” a number that’s at odds with the latest government data on American dietary intake.

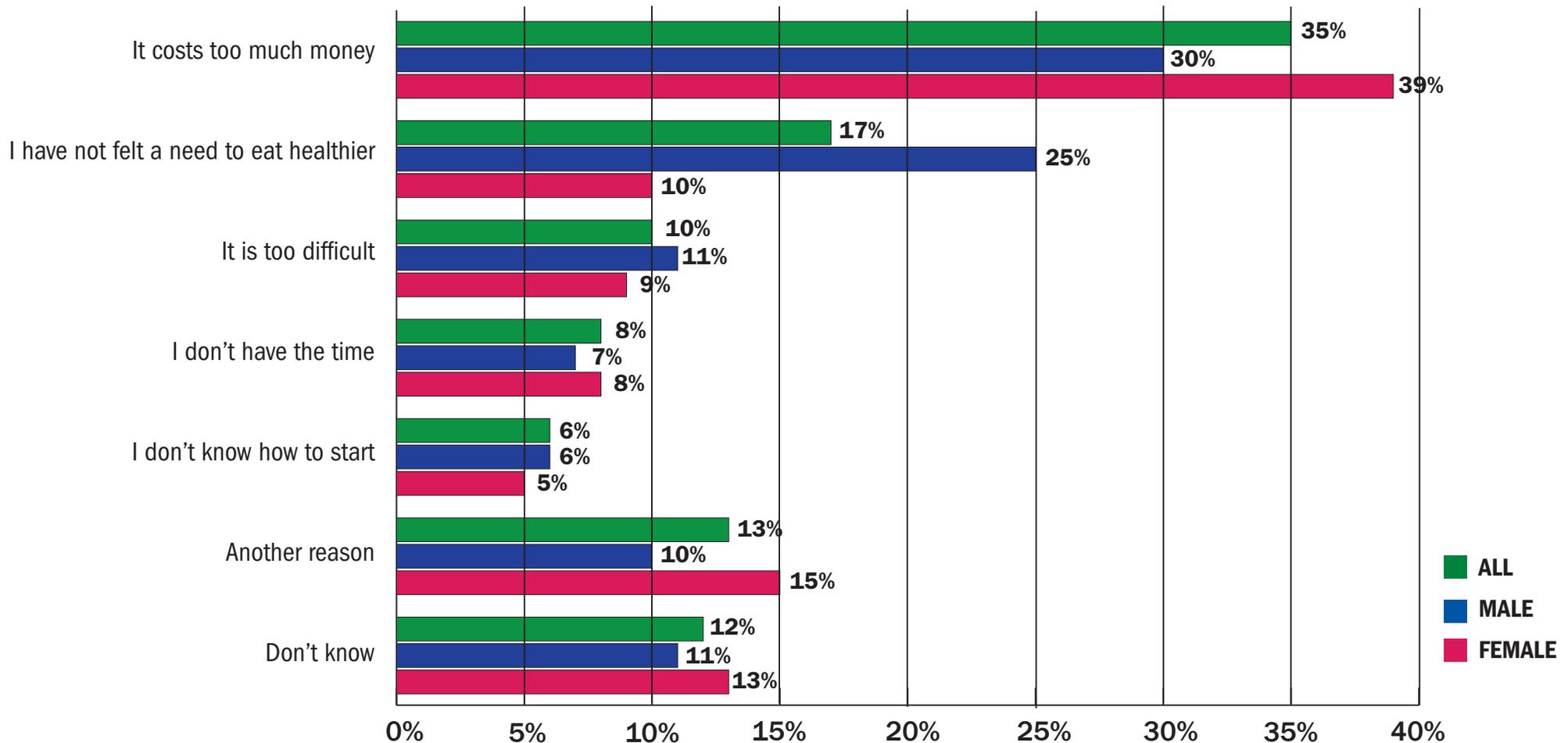
This complacency is troubling, given the worrisome results of this survey’s first question, which found only 23% of respondents reporting cancer-protective diets. Either Americans haven’t heard the message about the link between poor diets and cancer risk or—as the next question suggests—they find the barriers to making healthy changes too daunting.



## THE SURVEY QUESTIONS

Those respondents who did NOT report that their diets were “very healthy” in response to the last questions were asked why.

3. Which ONE of the following is the most important factor that has kept you from eating healthier?



## THE SURVEY QUESTIONS

3. Which ONE of the following is the most important factor that has kept you from eating healthier?

### AICR's TAKE:

Money is the factor most often cited as a barrier to eating healthier, with 35% naming it the most important reason they aren't making healthier dietary choices. Interestingly, more women (39%) than men (30%) who aren't eating "very healthy" diets identify cost as the main barrier to healthier eating.

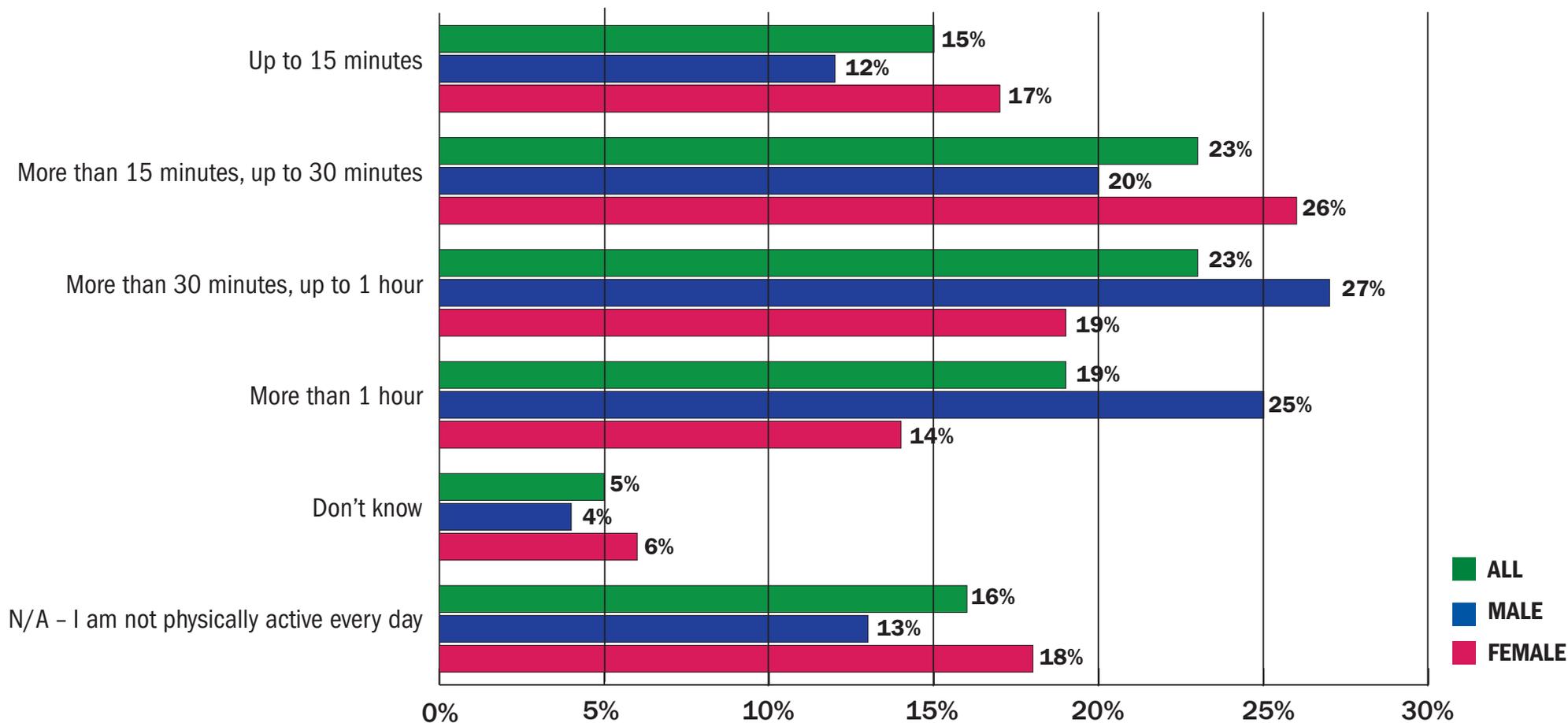
Yet eating more plant foods and less meat often ends up costing less money than traditional meat-centric meals. At the AICR website, we've got plenty of tips for healthy eating on a budget.

One of the largest gender splits seen in the entire survey occurs among those who say they have not felt any need to eat healthier; only 10% of women without "very healthy" diets cite it as their main reason for not eating healthier, compared to 25% of men. A similarly gendered complacency gap is seen among respondents who say they don't feel a need to be more active (see question 5).



## THE SURVEY QUESTIONS

4. How much time do you spend being physically active (e.g. walking, running, exercising, playing sports, etc.) every day?



## THE SURVEY QUESTIONS

4. How much time do you spend being physically active (e.g. walking, running, exercising, playing sports, etc.) every day?

### AICR's TAKE:

For cancer prevention, AICR recommends avoiding sedentary habits and getting at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity (anything that gets your heart beating faster and causes your breathing to deepen, like brisk walking) every day. As fitness improves, we recommend increasing the duration and/or intensity of this activity. Physical activity seems to help regulate the body's hormones in ways that help keep cancer from getting a foothold, and also help prevent the buildup of excess body fat, which is itself a cause of 10 different kinds of cancer (see question 6).

Over 2 in 5 respondents (42%) say they are getting more than 30 minutes of activity per day. When this figure is broken out by gender, the difference is stark: over half of American men (52%) say they are exceeding this level of activity, compared to only 1 in 3 (33%) American women.

According to the President's Council on Fitness, Sports and Nutrition, less than 5% of American adults participate in 30 minutes of physical activity each day and only 1/3 of adults receive the government-recommended amount of physical activity each week.

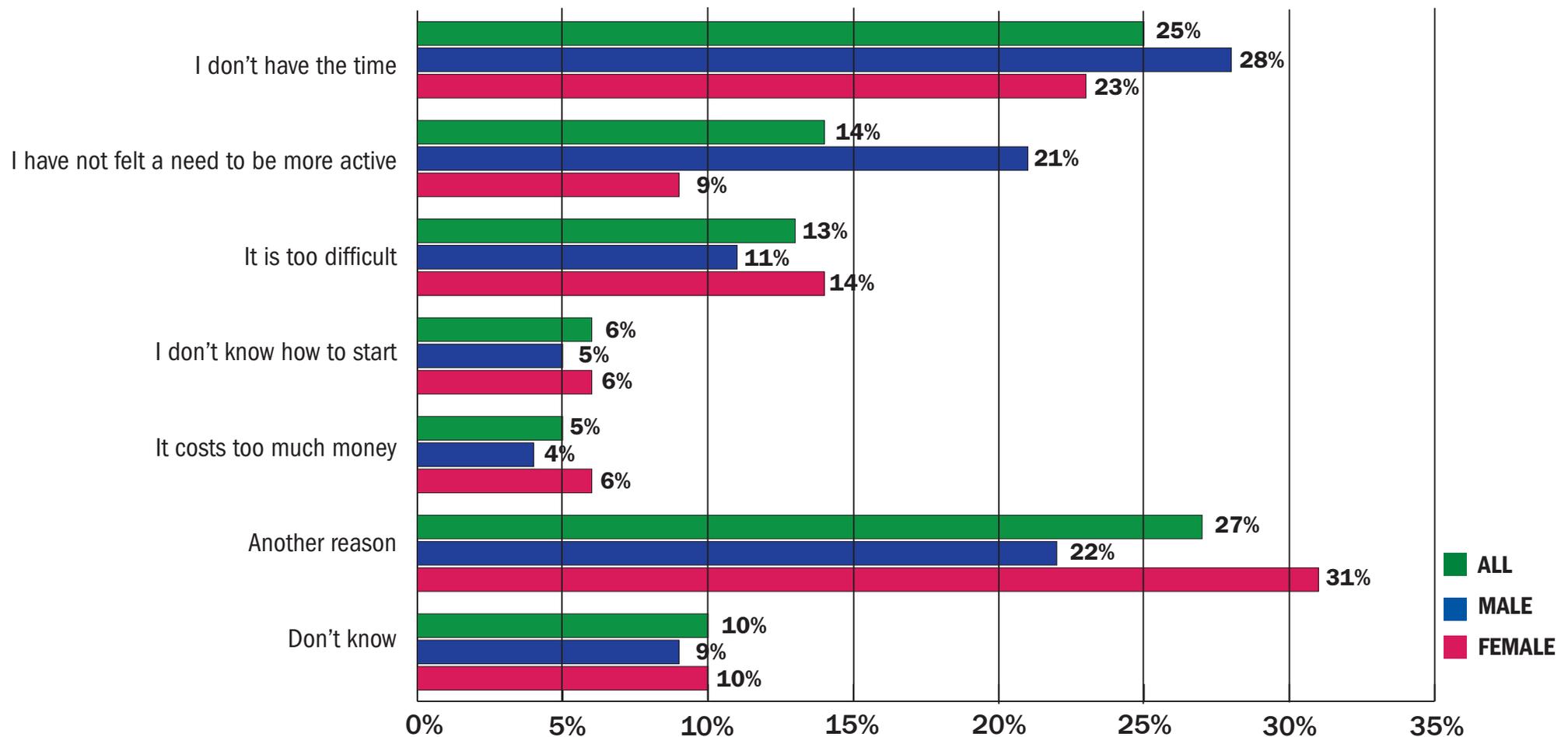
There is clearly a disconnect between the activity Americans get and the amount they believe they get. That disconnect may help to explain their answers to the next question.



## THE SURVEY QUESTIONS

Those respondents who said they were NOT physically active for more than 30 minutes a day were asked why they weren't.

5. Which ONE of the following is the most important factor that has kept you from being more active each day?



## THE SURVEY QUESTIONS

5. Which ONE of the following is the most important factor that has kept you from being more active each day?

### AICR's TAKE:

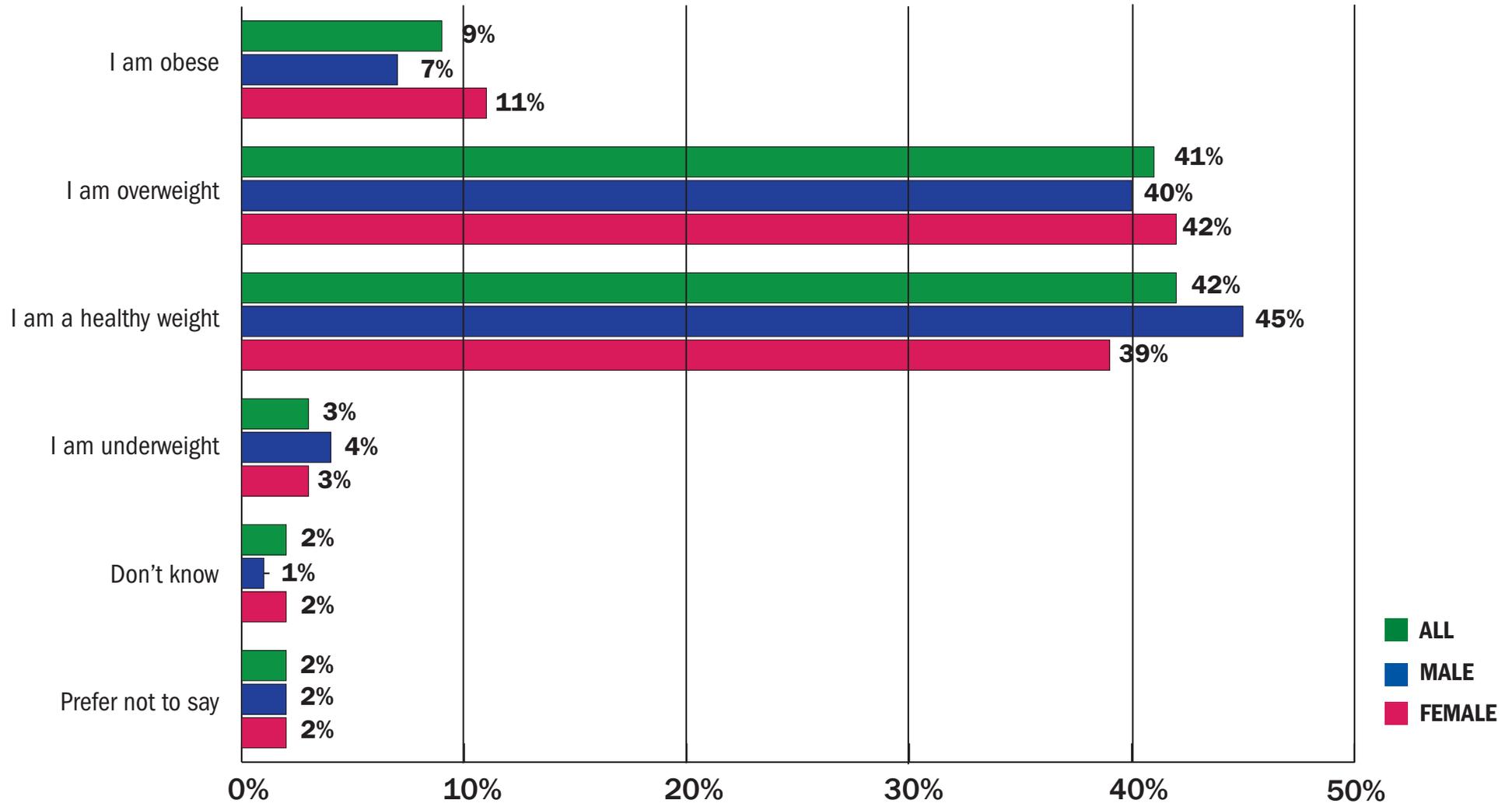
Lack of time was the single reason most often cited by less active Americans for not being active enough to realize the cancer-protective benefits of activity. But AICR points out that those recommended 30 minutes can be broken up throughout the day, in ten-minute chunks. Being active isn't about spending hours at the gym—it's about avoiding long stretches of inactivity, as much as possible.

A sharp gender disparity exists among those who said they didn't feel the need to be more active. Men (21%) are much more likely to find their current level of activity to be sufficient than are women (9%).



## THE SURVEY QUESTIONS

6. Which ONE of the following BEST describes your current weight?



## THE SURVEY QUESTIONS

6. Which ONE of the following BEST describes your current weight?

### AICR's TAKE:

Next to not smoking, avoiding obesity is the single most important thing people can do to lower their cancer risk. That's because carrying excess body fat changes the body's hormonal environment in ways that can encourage cancer growth. In fact, obesity is now considered a causative factor for ten different cancers: colorectal cancer, post-menopausal breast cancer, endometrial cancer, esophageal cancer, liver cancer, kidney cancer, pancreatic cancer, gallbladder cancer, advanced prostate cancer and ovarian cancer.

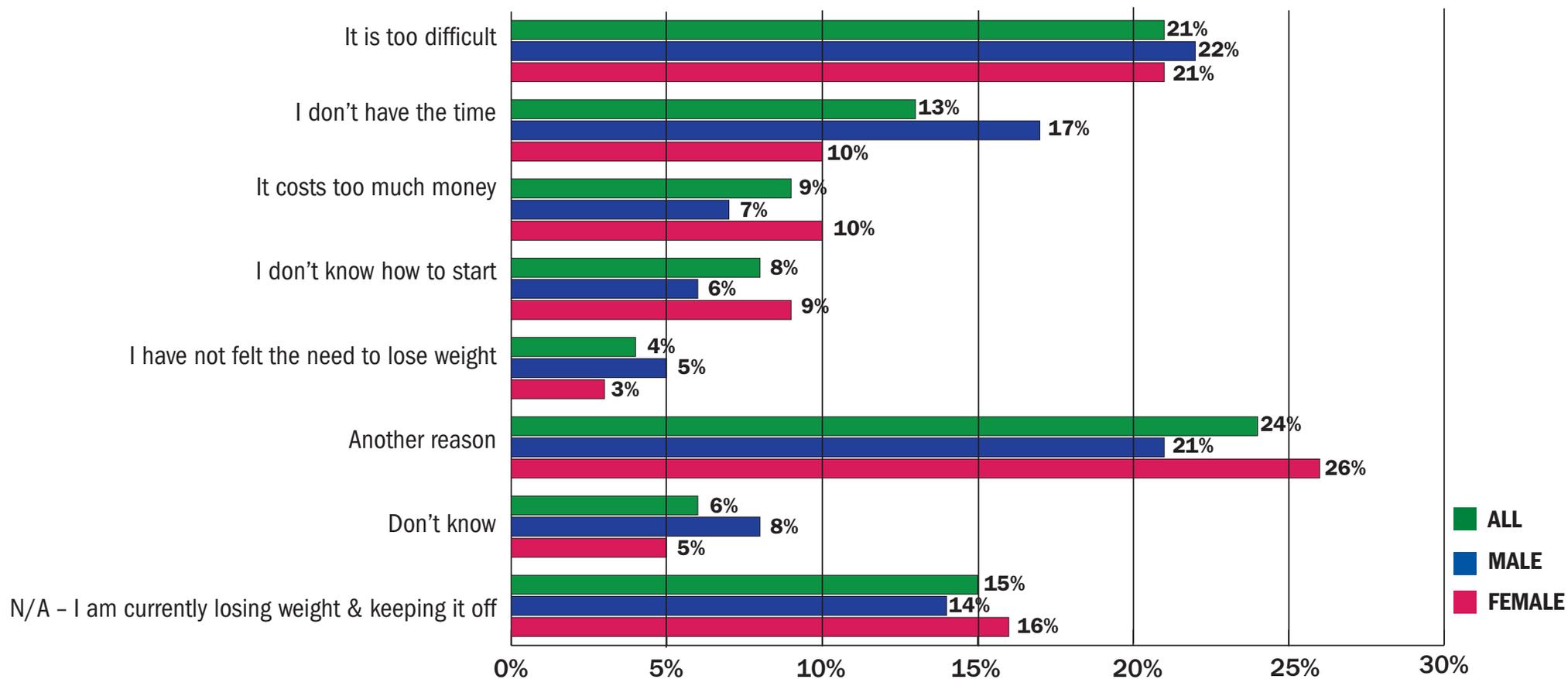
Fully 50% of respondents said they are currently overweight (41%) or obese (9%). But according to figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the actual percentage of Americans who are overweight and obese is 69%. This means that nearly 7 out of every 10 Americans are at higher risk for many of the most common cancers in the US. AICR estimates that avoiding obesity could prevent 121,700 cases of US cancer every year.



## THE SURVEY QUESTIONS

Those respondents who said they were overweight or obese were asked:

7. Which ONE, if any, of the following is the most important factor that has kept you from losing weight and keeping it off?



## THE SURVEY QUESTIONS

7. Which ONE, if any, of the following is the most important factor that has kept you from losing weight and keeping it off?

### AICR's TAKE:

Of the specific reasons cited for not losing weight, just over one in 5 respondents (21%) say “it is too difficult.” Another 13% say they don't have the time.

At AICR, we know that dropping weight for short amounts of time is something many people do, yet controlled, permanent weight loss—and the ongoing weight management associated with lasting behavior change—are much harder to achieve. At [aicr.org](http://aicr.org) AICR provides free online tools and information on the everyday choices that make slow and steady weight loss possible.



## THE TAKE-HOME

Prohibitive cost, lack of time, and degree of difficulty: these are the reasons Americans give for not eating healthier, being more active and managing their weight, respectively.

Clearly, Americans need help. They need to be shown how to eat healthy meals on a budget. They need practical advice on how to fit more activity into their daily routine. And they need encouragement to make specific changes in what and how much they eat, and in how much they move, that will pave the way for weight loss and ongoing weight management.

Organizations like AICR have a role in this. We can provide free, evidence-based tools and information for Americans about living for lower cancer risk—recipes, activity guides, research updates, and more. But information isn't enough.

To produce the kind of sweeping, systemic behavior changes that bear the potential to prevent hundreds of thousands of cancers every year, non-profit organizations like AICR need to work in concert with government, schools and the private sector to change the nation's food environment and public spaces in ways that privilege healthier choices.

By joining forces, we can ultimately cut the number of US cancers nearly in half. We can realize the future that AICR has been working toward for decades: a future in which no one develops a preventable cancer.

Cancer Prevention: Together We Can.



## METHODOLOGY

This survey has been conducted using an online interview administered to members of the YouGov Plc panel of 1.2 million individuals who have agreed to take part in surveys. Emails are sent to panelists selected at random from the base sample. The e-mail invites them to take part in a survey and provides a generic survey link. Once a panel member clicks on the link they are sent to the survey that they are most required for, according to the sample definition and quotas. (The sample definition could be “US adult population” or a subset such as “US adult females”). Invitations to surveys don’t expire and respondents can be sent to any available survey.

The responding sample is weighted to the profile of the sample definition to provide a representative reporting sample. The profile is normally derived from census data or, if not available from the census, from industry accepted data.

YouGov Plc make every effort to provide representative information. All results are based on a sample and are therefore subject to statistical errors normally associated with sample-based information.

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 1,106 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between November 2–3, 2015. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all US adults (aged 18+). NOTE: Summed figures in this report may not seem to add up. This is due to rounding error—all summed figures were calculated to 2 decimal places.”

