

12/16/2003 Entry: "Who's to Blame?"

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Obesity in America: How to Get Fat Without Really Trying

ABCNEWS.com

Dec. 8— Americans want to be thinner — yet they are getting fatter and fatter.

Nearly two-thirds of Americans are overweight and almost one in three Americans is obese, according to the federal government.

Who's to blame for America's obesity? Is it bad eating habits or poorly executed exercise regimes? Could the government and the food industry also be to blame?

"We're besieged," said Michael Jacobson, director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest. "Wherever we go, we're encouraged to eat junk food."

Some say that personal health and well being are a matter of personal responsibility. But the processed food industry and the government know what is happening — and they are making a bad situation worse.

Last year there were more than 2,800 new candies, desserts, ice creams and snacks on the market — but only 230 new fruit or vegetable products.

"I think that the food industry is providing a wide variety of choice, and certainly if you look at some of the recent market trends, you're seeing a major increase in the good-for-you foods category," said Chip Kunde, the senior vice president of the International Dairy Foods Association.

"Ultimately it is a matter of personal choice," he said. "I mean we can't dictate what people choose to eat, so yes at some point what people choose to eat or how they choose to move is ultimately the issue here."

The problem is Americans are choosing foods with more sweeteners and more calories, drinking more sodas, eating more candy, and snacking all day. Is the food industry simply giving people the products they want?

"I don't think that you can talk about giving the public what the public wants without discussing the \$33 billion a year that the food industry spends to try to promote that kind of want," said Marion Nestle, a professor of nutrition, food studies and public health at New York University.

In the last 20 years, the food industry has increased the size of the food products, increased the number of new products and increased the marketing of products.

Kunde said these strategies are not designed to get people to eat more, but rather to respond to people's needs.

'Kids Are Big Business'

It starts young. Marketing experts say the food industry spends billions of dollars marketing food to children, and every year it spends more.

"Kids are a very dynamic audience," said Paul Kurnit, an advertising executive who specializes in marketing to children.

The reason why so much time and money are spent advertising to children is because "kids are in many ways unsocialized, they are fresh-eyed, they are open to new ideas," said Kurnit. "Kids are big business, there's no question about that."

Most of the food that is advertised to children is processed food — and it is exactly what children are buying.

Children spend more of their own money on food than anything else — more than on CDs or movies or clothes or toys. And the public health implications of children's diets are enormous.

"The problem is that most of the foods that are marketed to children are unhealthy foods," said Margo Wootan, director of nutrition policy at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, "and the children are exposed to so many messages about junk food that the cultural norm around food has changed. So that children think that they should be getting candy and cookies and chips and soda and these other junkie foods all the time."

The average American child sees 10,000 food advertisements a year on television alone, and most of those advertisements are for fast food, sugarcoated cereal, soft drinks and candy, and other foods dense in fat and calories.

"There are baby food desserts. Maybe that's where it starts and then when kids are 2 years old they gain the strength to turn on the television set and they see the constant stream of commercials," said Jacobson. "Then they go to school. And even in schools there are encouragements to eat junk food."

But when advertisers like Paul Kurnit are putting together an advertising campaign, do they care whether the product is healthy or not?

"I care that the product has a positive role in a child's life," said Kurnit. "It is not my fundamental responsibility to be sure that that product in and of itself fulfills a complete diet."

When asked if he played a role in making less healthy products appealing to children, thereby increasing their desire for those products, Kurnit responded, "I've played a role in making all kinds of products appealing to kids and the issue of less healthy is a judgment call that you can make."

But advertisers know where asparagus and soda pop line up.

"You are absolutely correct that I am not going to get the same return on investment for a client in advertising asparagus and spinach to a kid as advertising some of the so-called less healthy products to kids," said Kurnit. "Guilty as charged."

Agricultural Subsidies' Impact

And nutritionists and health advocates say the government is contributing to obesity by giving subsidies to create fattening food.

"We have government policies that promote ... overeating from the beginning to the end of the food chain," said New York University's Nestle.

Today, American farmers produce for domestic consumption vastly more food than America needs — nearly twice as much. And the more food we grow, the more we eat. Abundance has become the enemy.

During the Depression of the 1930s, the government began subsidizing farmers to save them from financial ruin. The money never stopped. This year, the U.S. government will put roughly \$20 billion into agriculture — most of it going directly to the farmers.

But does the government take dietary guidelines and nutritional concerns into consideration when it's making those grants? Jacobson says no, "there's no concern whatsoever. There's no link between agricultural subsidies and health."

Jacobson said his group has been trying to find analyses of the health impact of farm subsidies, but it hasn't come up with a single study. The Bush "administration is handing out these subsidies without knowing what is the ultimate impact on their constituents, the American public," he told ABCNEWS.

Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson, who is in charge of public health for the Bush administration, doesn't see any connection between the federal government's agricultural subsidy programs and nutrition.

"I really don't," said Thompson. "Because the subsidy programs are things that are done through Congress, much more so than trying to come up with an overall strategy as, as far as nutrition is concerned."

He does agree, however, that whatever the government subsidizes is going to be grown more. And some of those products are not good for nutrition.

Since 1995, meat and dairy got about three times the subsidies of grains. According to data from the Department of Agriculture and the Environmental Working Group, fats and oils — the foods government says we should eat least — got about 20 times more subsidies than fruits and vegetables.

"There's a disconnect between agricultural policy and health policy," said Tom Stenzel, president and CEO of United Fresh Fruit & Vegetable Association. "That's probably the biggest problem that the federal government faces. We don't look at how agricultural policy can help improve public health. It's strictly about subsidies."

Corn, Corn, Everywhere Corn

The most heavily subsidized crop in America is corn. Farmers plant nearly 80 million acres of corn each year and in the last five years, they got an average of \$5.5 billion in federal subsidies every year.

Corn isn't just the corn-on-the-cob you get from the local market. It's also a cheap raw material for the giant food industry. Corn is processed and put into thousands of products that Americans use every day.

Popcorn, for example, is made with subsidized corn. The popcorn is so inexpensive that the bag it comes in costs more than the popcorn. That's why you can buy the mega size at the movies for just a few pennies more.

The oil the movie theaters cook it in is subsidized, too. And so is the vegetable oil they put on top.

Soda also contains a corn product: a corn-derived sweetener called high-fructose corn syrup. Since the 1970s, its use has gone up more than 4,000 percent. Subsidized corn sweeteners — which have pretty much taken over from sugar — are in candy and pretzels and some hot dogs, too.

Americans consume nearly three times more corn in the form of corn sweeteners than they do in every other form.

"So what these subsidies do is to lower the cost of the ingredients that go in processed foods, particularly high-calorie processed foods, and they make those foods cheaper," said Nestle.

If Americans were to follow a healthy diet, the Department of Agriculture says that nearly twice the number of acres of fruit and vegetables would have to be planted.

Is More Exercise the Solution?

Americans talk a lot about being fit and thinner. There are thousands of exercise videos, machines, gadgets and gimmicks on the shelves — all designed to help us lose the weight we put on by eating too much.

And for the food industry, exercise is a convenient answer to obesity.

"I think people do need to exercise more and not just exercise because when you think of exercise it often seems like it's more than you can fit into your very busy day, but you can take small steps," said Kunde.

But would obesity be solved by physical activity?

"The food industry would like to blame everything on lack of exercise. Eat as much as you want. Exercise it off," said Jacobson. "Go out and buy a bike or play basketball with your kid. We should do that, but that's only part of the battle."

Michael Mudd, a senior vice president at Kraft, America's largest food processor, said the food industry needs to be a part of the solution.

"Our message is, eat a balanced diet, eat foods that are at the top of the pyramid in moderation, and get some activity in your life," said Kunde.

But Kraft's approach is different. The company has proposed a wholesale review of all their products and their marketing. Because it knows obesity is an epidemic.

"Let's say I have a reduced-fat product that takes out 5 grams versus the original, and 10 people choose that product. So, on a population-wide basis, we've saved 50 grams of fat," said Mudd.

"But if I take the regular version of that product and I remove 1 gram of fat, and I do it in a way that doesn't affect the taste, and now 90 people choose that product, on a population-wide basis, I've saved 90 grams of fat. And that's my definition of a meaningful change."

In other words, making every product a little healthier would have an effect on more people.

To purchase a videotape of Peter Jennings' one-hour special How to Get Fat Without Really Trying, go to www.ABCNewsstore.com.

http://abcnews.go.com/sections/WNT/Living/obesity_031208.html