



# Food Safety *Fact Sheet*

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## NUTRITION, OBESITY, & PROCESSED FOOD

**I**T'S NO SECRET THAT most Americans aren't exactly the healthiest eaters. Decades of research has shown the connection between poor diet and health. Eating too much meat and other animal products is associated with various forms of chronic illness, including heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and cancer. Every health organization recognizes that eating a mostly whole foods, plant-based diet is optimum for good health.

Yet Americans continue to eat all the wrong foods. According to federal data, Americans eat more than the recommended amounts of meat, oils, added sweeteners, and refined grains, while our diets are falling short on health-promoting foods such as whole grains, fruits, and vegetables. The good news is that in recent years, meat consumption is declining. But we still have a long way to go toward consuming an optimum diet to prevent chronic diseases.

### LIQUID CANDY

Of particular concern is America's love affair with sweetened soft drinks. Americans drink more than twice as much soda today as they did in 1971. One-half of the U.S. population consumes sugar drinks on any given day, and 25% consumes at least 200 calories (more than one 12-oz can of cola). Males drink more than females and teen boys consume the most. An incredible 70 percent of boys aged 2-19 drink sweetened drinks every day and adolescents (ages 12-19) consume a whopping 273 calories per day from beverages.<sup>4</sup>

The science is clear that excess consumption of soft drinks contributes to obesity and type 2 diabetes, among other health problems, and is associated with overall poor diet.



### POWER OF THE PROCESSED FOOD INDUSTRY

The huge change, within just a matter of decades in how Americans eat is no accident. The shift is due to how food is processed and marketed by an increasingly consolidated food industry whose only concern is moving more products. Estimates are that the food industry spends at

least \$36 billion a year marketing its products.<sup>5</sup> The chain restaurant industry has played an especially vital role in encouraging Americans to rely on cheap, fast, and unhealthy foods. About one-half of all meals are now consumed outside of the home and research indicates that people eat less healthfully when dining out.

Another important factor in processed food is cheap agricultural inputs. Large federal tax subsidies to crops like corn, soy, and wheat, which are mostly either fed to factory-farmed animals or used for processed foods, helps keep all the wrong food cheap. Meanwhile, we don't even currently grow enough fruits and vegetables in the United States to meet the federal government's own (weak) dietary guidelines.

Also, food industry consolidation has meant increasing political and economic power in the hands of fewer corporations. This concentrated control has happened in every sector of the food economy, from animal factories to food manufacturers to grocery stores. For example, Walmart is now the America's largest food retailer. In 29 metropolitan areas, Walmart controls 50 percent or more of the grocery market, and Walmart controls about 22 to 24 percent of food retail in the U.S.<sup>6</sup>

### QUICK FACTS:<sup>1</sup>

- 7 out of 10 deaths among Americans each year are from chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer and stroke.
- One third of Americans are obese—more than double since 1970.
- 17% of youth between ages 6 and 19 are obese.
- Fewer than 22% of high school students and only 24% of adults eat 5 or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day.

### OTHER DISTURBING FACTS ABOUT CHILDREN AND OBESITY:<sup>2,3</sup>

- Since 1980, obesity prevalence among children and adolescents has almost tripled.
- Obese children are more likely to have high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and type 2 diabetes, which are all risk factors for heart disease.
- 1 of 7 low-income, pre-school-aged children is obese.
- American Indian and Alaska Native children (20.7 percent) and Hispanic children (17.9%) aged 2-4 have the highest rates of obesity.

## BIG FOOD AND MARKETING TO CHILDREN

If you've ever tried to drag your small child through the cereal aisle, or driven past McDonald's and been begged incessantly to stop, you've been the victim of "the nag factor," which is the food industry's way of coming between parents and their children.

Simply put, junk food marketing to children is big business. According to the federal government, the food industry spends close to \$2 billion targeting children, annually.<sup>7</sup> (That figure is likely to be an under-estimate as much marketing is difficult to measure.) Food marketers know they have to get to kids while they are young, while brand preferences are still forming. Young children are especially vulnerable because they don't yet have the cognitive capacity to even understand what marketing is.

Given the importance of prevention when it comes to obesity and chronic disease, is the food industry just setting children up for a lifetime of bad health? The research shows that junk food marketing significantly impacts children's food choices.

Meanwhile, the food industry claims that its own voluntary, self-regulatory guidelines are sufficient to protect kids from unhealthy marketing messages. But several studies have shown self-regulation to be a colossal failure. It's time to stop junk food marketing to children once and for all. (*See How to Get Involved.*)

## WHO IS MINDING THE (FOOD) STORE?

It's really no wonder Americans are confused about how to eat when most of the information out there is so heavily influenced by the food industry. In addition to the endless marketing, food lobbyists also play a key role in setting federal dietary guidelines, which in turn influences food assistance programs such as school meals.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has a serious conflict of interest because on one hand, its mission is to promote the interests of agri-business, while at the same time, the agency is charged with setting nutrition standards, as well as administering huge food assistance programs that affect tens of millions of Americans.

Meanwhile the U.S. Food and Drug Administration is in charge of food labeling and approving food additives, among other duties. But in a food environment with tens of thousands of products on store shelves, this perennially under-funded agency cannot possibly keep up with a food industry intent on bending the rules. As a result, processed food products are chock-full of ingredients of questionable safety, and labels display all sorts of deceptive health claims designed to keep consumers confused.

The food industry, in the form of massive lobbying trade groups such as the Grocery Manufacturers Association and the National Restaurant Association wields tremendous power in the halls of Congress. Obviously we need to get the politics out of food policy.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

The food news is there is no shortage of ways to help improve how Americans eat. Whether your interest is improving your child's school menu, connecting local farmers to urban areas, or supporting federal policy efforts, you can get involved.

Here are a few actions you can take:

- 1) Demand an end to all forms of marketing to children, period.
- 2) Demand more fresh, local foods in schools and other institutions.
- 3) Work to improve healthy food access, especially in low-income areas.
- 4) Get the food industry to stop influencing dietary recommendations.
- 5) Don't let the food industry coopt the national discussion.

1 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Chronic Disease and Health Promotion, page visited March 22, 2012: <http://www.cdc.gov/chronicdisease/overview/index.htm>

2 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Overweight and Obesity, page visited March 22, 2012: <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/childhood/data.html>

3 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Obesity Among Low-Income Preschool Children fact sheet, page visited March 22, 2012: <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/downloads/PedNNSFactSheet.pdf>

4 All statistics in this paragraph from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, NCHS Data Brief, No. 71, August 2011, page visited March 22, 2012: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db71.htm>

5 Food Politics by Marion Nestle (University of California Press, 2002)

6 The American Way of Eating by Tracie McMillan (Scribner, 2012)

7 Federal Trade Commission report, Food Marketing to Children and Adolescents, page visited March 22, 2012: <http://www.ftc.gov/os/2008/07/P064504foodmktngreport.pdf>