

# The Nutrition Reporter™

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**EXTRA**

The independent newsletter that reports vitamin, mineral, and food therapies

## Who is to Blame for the Fat Epidemic?

By Jack Challem

Just who is to blame for the raging epidemic of overweight Americans – and increasing numbers of overweight people around the world? Does the fault lie with companies selling fast foods and junk foods or with the consumers who eat and drink their products?

The sad fact is that one-third of Americans are obese – that is, weighing at least 30 pounds more than their ideal weight. Another third are overweight, but not obese, at least not yet. In other words, two out of every three American adults are fat – a situation that fundamentally alters their endocrine function and sharply increases the risk of developing diabetes, heart disease, Alzheimer's, arthritis, and many other illnesses.

When people blame the obvious suspects – McDonald's, Kraft, and other purveyors of junk foods – the companies essentially shrug their corporate shoulders, disavow any responsibility, and blame overweight people for being gluttons and not exercising enough. In my mind, these responses are tantamount to blaming the victim and are in the same league as telling a woman it was her fault for being raped.

### Junk Food Nation

The fast food and junk food companies belie the truth with their own actions. Most of their foods are, frankly, nutritionally worthless. The typical fast food meal is formulated from some of the unhealthiest food ingredients ever created: hydrogenated vegetable oils (the principal source of trans fats), various types of sugars (e.g., high-fructose corn syrup), highly refined grains (e.g., the buns), and high-glycemic foods (e.g., fries).

These food ingredients are designed for ease of manufacturing, long shelf life, taste, and

addictiveness. They contain none of the nutritional and biochemical building blocks needed for normal biological functioning and health, and the negative health consequences of such foods are enormous. Trans fats interfere with the body's processing of healthy anti-inflammatory omega-3 fats and their hormone-like products. Sugars, refined grains, and other high-glycemic foods lead to a rollercoaster effect on blood sugar and insulin levels, affecting mood, weight, and disease risk. Some research even suggests that fructose alters the brain's appetite-control center, encouraging people to overeat.

### Nutritionally Worthless Ingredients

Aggressive and incessant marketing and advertising has enabled fast-foods and junk foods to dominate our nutritional landscape. Almost every supermarket food sold in a box contains refined grains, sugars, or hydrogenated vegetable oils – or all three. You also get what you pay for. The nutritional quality of many deeply discounted foods, such as those sold in PriceCostco and Sam's Club, are even worse than standard supermarket fare because food makers look for the least expensive methods of manufacturing foods!

Meanwhile, fast-food companies, including McDonald's, Burger King, Domino's, and the like, have been particularly insidious in their marketing to children, cultivating toddlers to be life-long consumers of burgers, fries, tacos, and pizzas. Coca-Cola and Pepsi have made financial deals with school systems around the country to stock vending machines full of soft drinks and candy bars and to profit from children who are, not surprisingly, getting fatter and fatter.

In many small-town supermarkets, it is now

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near impossible to find a reasonable selection of fresh foods. The food companies have effectively narrowed many food choices to either this junk food or that junk food – Pepsi versus Coca-Cola, or DiGiorno’s Pizza versus Tostino’s Pizza – and then they have the gall to rationalize and blame consumers for making poor food choices.

Even adults who know better, nutritionally, often succumb. Work, parenthood, commuting, and all too much to do squeeze out the time needed to plan meals and buy and cook fresh and wholesome foods. At the same time, food marketing and advertising are devoted to promoting one type of refined-carb/high-trans fat food or another – pay attention to television commercials and the coupons inserted into the Sunday newspaper. A fast food meal or a microwave meal – nutritional wastelands – save a few precious minutes for doing something else. Under these circumstances, are people choosing to eat poorly? Or are they simply doing the best they can under the duress of modern life?

#### Is It Just a Matter of Choice?

Some authors and psychologists have argued that people are ultimately responsible for their choices, dietary or otherwise. I agree – but with a crucial caveat: people must be aware that they have choices, and that their choices have health consequences. If they have not been raised with fresh home-cooked meals, what choices could they be aware of beyond McDonald’s or Burger King? And without being taught something about nutrition, or having good examples to follow at home or school, how could they possibly know that fast foods and other junk foods contribute to their risk of obesity and diabetes.

Only one of every three meals is cooked at home from scratch, with the rest now consisting of ready-to-heat meals or take-out meals from restaurants and supermarkets. As increasing numbers of people eat meals outside the home, they lose an appreciation of wholesome meals. They also forget, or never learn, rudimentary knowledge about vegetables. Generation by generation, fewer people seem capable of identifying fresh foods, let alone cooking them.

The scientific evidence strongly suggests that the eating habits of one generation affects the health of subsequent generations. In other

words, poor eating habits negatively affect a person’s genes and biochemistry, and many of these changes can become permanent and inheritable. This genetic effect of bad eating habits was shown decades ago in animal experiments and just recently in a multigenerational study in Sweden. This means that the effects of fast foods and junk foods will go far beyond the current generation. Today’s eating habits will increase the risk of health problems in subsequent generations, and they will likely develop the same health problems as their parents but at younger ages.

#### Who is Really to Blame?

And so, who is to blame? On an individual basis, I believe it boils down to this: if you understand the nutritional differences between broiled fish with steamed vegetables and a burger with fries, and then choose to eat the burger and fries, you are to blame. But if you, like so many people, do not understand the nutritional differences between fresh, whole foods and junk foods, then I believe the food companies are to blame.

On a global basis, I do blame the food companies because they promote and profit from unhealthy foods. I hope, some day, that the managers and marketing folks at the fast food and junk food companies face a judge and jury to be tried for “crimes against humanity.” I can imagine them rationalizing and saying, “I was only following the marketing plan.” If you think my view is extreme, consider that fast food and junk food companies are destroying the health of millions of people today and multiple generations of people. Is this not a crime against humanity? These companies are indeed committing a form of genocide. □

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