

## **Expert blames obesity on food-industry marketing**

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When Marion Nestle gives talks on the politics surrounding America's burgeoning obesity epidemic, she sometimes displays an attention-getting image on a screen. In it, a corpulent Uncle Sam clutches a huge cheeseburger while declaring, "I want YOU to eat more."

Can we really blame our growing national girth on Uncle Sam, or on the food industry or anyone but ourselves?

To a large extent, yes, contends Nestle, professor and chair of the Department of Nutrition and Food Studies at New York University.

Nestle is the author of "Food Politics," a book that's been stirring up the food world like a blender on "high," drawing both praise and brickbats for its take on the epidemic's causes and possible cures.

Government policies and industry practices have combined to promote Americans' rampant overeating, Nestle told a gathering of nutrition professionals at the University of Washington last week.

Massive, kid-targeted advertising of junk food, the placement of pop and candy machines in schools, misleading food labeling, gargantuan servings at restaurants, and government's failure to push harder for healthful eating are just a few of the contributing forces, she said.

"I think it's time for political and social action around these issues, at a time when people are ready to hear about it," said Nestle, a dark-haired woman who exudes feisty energy.

Although Americans need to take individual responsibility for their own eating and exercise habits, and their children's, rising obesity rates show that's no longer enough, Nestle said.

With studies revealing that more than half of American adults are now overweight or obese, the issue has become a societal problem that must be attacked on a societal scale, said Nestle, who has served as a nutrition policy adviser to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

She also has served on nutrition and science advisory committees to the Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration.

Underlying Americans' overeating is that the U.S. produces far more food than we need, Nestle said. Total production equals about 3,800 calories per person per day roughly

twice the average daily need, she said.

"We have too much food in this country," said Nestle. Thanks partly to this, "food is cheap" close to the cheapest in the world relative to average income, she said.

America's prodigious production, she maintained, leads to relentless marketing campaigns to get everyone to eat more. It also places an emphasis on processed (and often less healthful) foods that command higher prices and reap more profits than unprocessed foods such as fruits and vegetables.

Elements of this picture can be seen everywhere, Nestle said. Among them:

The constant onslaught of food advertising, most of it for processed foods or fast food. Particularly irksome to Nestle are TV commercials aimed at children, who, she says, have not yet developed the analytical skills needed to view them objectively.

"Marketers will tell you that advertising doesn't sell food products and that if it did they'd be really rich," Nestle said. "Well, they *do* know how to sell products, and they *are* rich."

Giant servings of food and beverages, such as 64-ounce containers of soft drinks sold at the movies and loaded with 1,200 calories each.

"I'm amazed at how difficult it is to get across the concept that larger containers hold more calories," Nestle said.

Labels that play up a product's claimed health benefits despite its other, potentially harmful features. Example: heart-healthy claims linked to low fat in a breakfast cereal that's high in sugar and calories.

Government agencies are reluctant to make an all-out push for Americans to eat less partly because reduced consumption could raise food prices, Nestle asserted.

"Prices going up is a political no-no," she said.

She assailed what she considers "a major conflict of interest" involving the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"Its major goal is to promote agricultural interests," she said. "So why do dietary guidelines come from the Department of Agriculture instead of from the Department of Health and Human Services?"

Allowing the USDA to write those guidelines, she contended, has yielded "watered-down" recommendations that encourage more use of meat and dairy products, for instance, than Americans need or should eat.

Nestle's book suggests various solutions to the obesity problem. Among them:

Mount a major national campaign to promote "eat less, move more."

Restrict TV advertising of foods of "minimal nutritional value," and provide equal time for "eat less, move more" messages.

Tax junk food.

Subsidize fruits and vegetables.

In schools, ban commercials for low-nutrition foods and corporate logos on teaching materials.

Require that school meals meet dietary guidelines.

Require nutritional labeling on food containers in fast-food restaurants.

Require that print food advertisements disclose calories.

Require daily physical-education opportunities in schools.

Nestle's book and talks have drawn sharp criticism from some in the food industry and elsewhere. In particular, she favors too much government interference in the way Americans eat, some argue.

"Sadly, little has been put forward to counter this campaign to control everything we eat for our own good," Bruce Bartlett wrote in National Review Online, the conservative magazine's Internet version. Bartlett is a senior fellow at the National Center for Policy Analysis.

"It will be too bad if most Americans react to the campaign against Big Food the same way they reacted to that on Big Tobacco," Bartlett said. "They may think that using taxes to discourage obesity is reasonable. But if the zealots are successful, we will have lost a little more of our freedom and given the government yet another means of controlling our behavior and picking our pockets."

Meanwhile, "Food Politics" won an endorsement from Sheldon Margen, editor of the respected Berkeley Wellness Letter, who called it "a major contribution to understanding the interaction of politics and science, especially the science of nutrition," and of "extreme value" to policy makers and others concerned with the American diet.

Nestle told her UW audience she was encouraged by several things she's heard and seen recently, including "something exciting" in Washington: a movement, still in its early stages, to legally restrict advertising and sales of junk food in schools across the state.

Nestle also learned of the new Center for Public Health Nutrition at the UW, founded

earlier this year and focusing largely on preventing obesity in Washington.

Nestle sees these and other events and statements she's hearing across the country as signs the public is ready to take action on a societal level to fight obesity.