

Questions for: **Marion Nestle**

# Fighting the Battle of the Bulge



New York University Professor of Nutrition and ‘Obesity Warrior’ **Marion Nestle** talks about food politics, and how we can ‘vote’ with our food dollars for a healthier society.

**Karen Christensen: The subtitle of your book, *Food Politics, is How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*. What are some key ways the food industry influences our eating habits?**

**Marion Nestle:** The book is about the influence of food marketing on obesity and other aspects of health. I’m not saying that food company executives are deliberately trying to make people fat; they are just trying to sell their products in an enormously competitive environment. Advertising is only the tip of the iceberg; food marketing has changed social norms. For example, when did it become OK to eat in formerly-forbidden places like bookstores and libraries? And when did it become OK for kids to drink soft drinks at school?

**KC: In your view, food, heart disease and cancer are not just personal issues, but “bona fide social and political problems.” How so?**

**MN:** People do not make food choices in a vacuum: social norms greatly affect what is considered socially acceptable. Research demonstrates, beyond question, that people will eat more if more food is put in front of them. So larger portions encourage people to eat more. Changing social norms to make enormous portions socially acceptable has had a major effect on calorie intake.

**KC: Talk a bit about the public health stakes involved.**

**MN:** Well, we know what causes diet-related illnesses – dietary factors that raise blood cholesterol, blood pressure and blood sugar levels, leading to conditions like obesity, heart disease, stroke and cancer. If we look at obesity alone, the costs to society are estimated to be in the range of hundreds of billions of dollars in health care costs and personal problems. We’re now seeing type 2 diabetes – which used to be called ‘adult-

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onset diabetes’ – in very young children. This will be a life-long problem for them to manage, and very expensive for all involved – individuals, families and the entire system – because people with diabetes generate health care costs that are two to three times those without the condition. And it’s not just in North America – it’s happening everywhere in the world where people are starting to have a little money.

**KC: After 50 years of nutritional advice, the public is more confused than ever about what to eat. Why is this?**

**MN:** You have to ask the question, ‘to whose benefit is it to keep the public confused about nutrition?’ I can think of a long list, but one answer that pops to mind is certainly the food industry. Its mantra is that ‘there’s no such thing as a good or a bad

food’, that all foods are part of a healthful diet, and that the keys to healthy eating are balance, variety and moderation – all true, of course, in theory. But in practice, \$36 billion worth of advertising and marketing in the U.S. goes into directly selling what you might call ‘top of the old pyramid’ foods – foods that are high in fat, sugars, and calories, much of them from corn sweeteners and hydrogenated fats.

**KC: How does promoting eating translate into promoting overeating?**

**MN:** It’s simple: the big dark secret of the American food system is that there is far too much food. The U.S. food system makes available 3,900 calories per day for every man, woman and child in the country – roughly twice the average need. In this hugely competitive situation, food companies have only two choices: they can either get people to eat their food instead of someone else’s, or they can get people to eat more food, in general. They are skilled at doing both.

**KC: You have said that “fat people are good for business,” and if people ate less, it would be very bad for business. Is there a way out of this conundrum?**

**MN:** Obviously yes, or I wouldn't bother saying such things. The investment analyses – and there have been three that I'm aware of (from **UBS Warburg, J.P. Morgan** and **Morgan Stanley**) all say the same thing: that if people want to lose weight, they're going to have to eat less; that eating less is going to be bad for business; and that it will be much worse for some businesses than others. So if food companies don't fix their product mixes to make healthier food products, and market them in a way that emphasizes their healthfulness – especially those that are lower in calories – they're going to be left behind in what is becoming a mass movement towards more healthful eating. They also are going to have to stop marketing foods directly to children, and other borderline unethical practices. Once people realize the connection between food marketing and eating habits, they become empowered to think differently about what to choose. People can (and will, I hope) vote with their forks, but differently than they have in the past.

**KC: People in the food industry deflect blame for poor eating habits by arguing that 'no one forces people to eat junk food' – that we are all personally responsible for our choices. What is your stance on this?**

**MN:** Obviously, we vote with our forks. But unless we really understand how the food system works, we won't know how to vote wisely. I think food choices are about democracy, so the voting analogy is very apt.

**KC: You have been battling soft drink contracts with schools since 1998. Are things getting any better?**

**MN:** All you have to do is look around you. I think what's happening with food is a national movement to take back real personal choice. Schools across the country are saying they will not sell out children's health to junk food and soft drink companies. Legislatures throughout the country are introducing bills to try to control food company marketing practices. This is grass roots democracy in action.

**KC: You believe the food industry takes advantage of the vulnerability of young children: for instance, McDonalds advertises on Teletubbies. Should this be outlawed? Are there any examples of food companies 'doing the right thing' with respect to children?**

**MN:** Food companies have an inherent conflict of interest. They have to sell more food, not less. They have to report corporate growth to Wall Street, every quarter. Junk foods are highly profitable and hard to give up or replace. And kids are an important market for lots of products, especially if they can be induced to pester their parents for them. Several companies (**Kraft**, for example) have announced self-regulation strategies, but it remains to be seen how they will play out. Kraft, of course, is owned by **Altria**, which owns **Philip Morris** – not exactly a company famous for its concern for children's health or following rules against marketing to children.

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If anything, Philip Morris is famous for clever ways to get around those rules. Will Altria allow Kraft to become a more ethical company if people buy fewer boxes of Kool Aid, macaroni and cheese, or Lunchables? History is not reassuring on that point.

**KC: McDonald's now sells a leaner version of Chicken McNuggets, and Kraft is working on a 'healthier' Oreo. Are these the types of decisions that will make a difference to society overall?**

**MN:** You are asking a philosophical question: is a better junk food a better choice? The companies would like you to think so, but I am skeptical. Look at artificial sweeteners, for example. Their use has risen exactly in parallel with rising rates of obesity. And much of what companies are doing goes under the heading of what I call 'calorie distracters': they take the trans fats out or put some whole grain in so you forget about the calories.


**KC: In a nutshell, what is your advice to people who want eat more healthfully?**

**MN:** A great way to improve diets quickly is to stop drinking soft drinks and juice drinks. These are a no brainer – they contain calories and nothing else. Also, stop snacking, or reduce your number of snacks, and eat foods in smaller portions. Overall, the concept is simple: eat less, move more, and eat more fruits and vegetables.

**KC: Looking ahead 20 years, are you hopeful that people will become as savvy about the hazards of overeating as they are about the hazards of smoking?**

**MN:** But I see so much change taking place in society right now, and so much public awareness of what a serious problem food marketing has become – and why we need to do something about it – that I can't help but be optimistic.

**KC: What are you working on at the moment?**

**MN:** Everywhere I go, people ask me, 'What should I eat? How can I lose weight?' I have a new book coming out in May 2006 (from Farrar, Straus & Giroux), tentatively titled, *What to Eat*. It's about how to make intelligent choices in supermarkets. In it, I go through supermarkets aisle-by-aisle and discuss every issue I can think of that comes up in that context, from nutrition to politics. I had a lot of fun doing it, and I hope readers will find it useful. 

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Marion Nestle is the Paulette Goddard Professor of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health at New York University, in the department that she chaired from 1988 through 2003. The author of *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* and *Safe Food: Bacteria, Biotechnology, and Bioterrorism* (University of California Press, 2002 and 2004, respectively), she has been a member of the Food and Drug Administration's Food Advisory Committee and Science Board, the 1995 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee and the American Cancer Society committee that issues dietary guidelines for cancer prevention. She appeared in the 2004 film *Super Size Me*, playing herself.