

Food for Thought for a Fat Nation

Nanci Hellmich

USA Today

2/19/02

Is our willpower powerful enough to overcome all the tempting food available to us, from Big Macs to giant Snickers bars to all-you-can-eat buffets?

Several national diet researchers who are studying the issue say our willpower doesn't stand a chance unless the nation's food-laden environment changes first.

It's very hard, says Marion Nestle, professor and chair of the department of nutrition and food studies at New York University. "We are so programmed to eat everything in front of us. Eating is fun, and not eating is not fun."

In her new book, *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* (University of California Press, \$29.95), Nestle puts much of the blame for the nation's weight problem on the food industry. The book already is generating controversy even though it doesn't arrive in bookstores until next month. In it, she says that:

The U.S. food industry produces 3,800 calories of food a day for every man, woman and child in the country. Some of those calories are wasted (leftovers, spoiled food, oil used for frying), which brings the number down to 2,680 calories, still more than most people need.

Food is available almost everywhere and affordable to most people.

Food companies compete fiercely for consumer dollars, spending \$30 billion annually on marketing and advertising campaigns trying to convince people to eat more of their products and to eat their product over another product. "They want people to eat when they're not hungry and keep eating when they're full," she says. One way they do that: Large portions.

The industry works "tirelessly to convince government officials, nutrition professionals and the media that their products promote health — or at least do no harm," Nestle says.

Her textbook-like tome has raised the hackles of food industry officials who say people can choose what they want to eat. "If you look at the supermarket, there is a wide variety of choices — regular calorie, lower calorie, reduced fat, sugar-free, and as much or perhaps more money is spent marketing low- and reduced-calorie foods as other foods," says Gene Grabowski of the Grocery Manufacturers of America, the trade group that represents brand-name food companies.

No matter who's right, something is happening because the whole country is packing on pounds. About 61% of Americans, or 127 million people, weigh too much, according to

the latest government statistics. And 26%, or 54 million are obese — that is, 30 or more pounds over a healthy weight. That's up from 15% in the late 1970s.

Weighing too much contributes to heart disease, diabetes, arthritis and other ailments, and the U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher recently issued a call to action to put the brakes on the epidemic of overweight and obesity in this country.

Healthy weight takes effort

Experts say some people have to struggle more to control their weight than others. There are some people who don't have to worry about their weight at all because they seem genetically protected from gaining too much, says James Hill, an obesity researcher at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver. And there is a small group of people who are going to be obese no matter what they do.

But the vast majority fall somewhere in between. Whether they can maintain a healthy body weight largely depends on how much effort they are willing to put into it, he says. Genes affect how the body is going to relate to the environment, and because obesity is on the rise, experts believe the current environment makes it very difficult to resist gaining weight.

"There are so many pressures on people to be thin and physically fit that if willpower was enough, we'd have the weight problem solved," says Kelly Brownell, a psychologist and director of the Yale University Center for Eating and Weight Disorders. "But until the environment changes, it will be impossible to reverse the increasing prevalence of obesity."

Robert Jeffery, a professor of epidemiology at the University of Minnesota, believes the food temptations are so pervasive that if you took away people's bathroom scales and dressed them in loose-fitting clothing so they couldn't see or feel the changes in their body weight as easily, they'd gain weight spontaneously.

"It's a myth that you can control your weight without paying attention to it," he says.

It is possible to maintain a healthy weight. Some people do it. Researchers are looking for clues in how that's accomplished with the National Weight Control Registry, a group of more than 3,000 people who have maintained at least a 30-pound weight loss for a year. These folks exercise for about an hour a day, eat a relatively low-fat diet, weigh themselves regularly, have breakfast every day and keep track of what they eat.

"These are the people who can actually do the right thing in the current environment, which is conducive to overeating and low physical activity," says Hill, co-founder of the registry. "They have to swim upstream against the environment. If we were able to change the environment a little so it wasn't quite as obesity promoting, you'd find more people would be able to do it."

Hill believes there needs to be more opportunity for people to be active, and for the past few years, the government has been pushing the need for more sidewalks, walking and bicycle trails and greater access to community recreation centers.

Portions bigger than ever

Most nutritionists agree that a big part of Americans' weight problems is related to the size of the portions today. There are Supersize fries, 64-ounce soft drinks, muffins the size of a loaf of bread.

The increase in portion size parallels the increase in the level of obesity in this country, according a new study by a New York University researcher published in this month's issue of the American Journal of Public Health.

It's in the best interest of the company to sell bigger portions and to sell "value-added" foods, Nestle says. For instance, a company makes more selling potato chips than selling a potato, she says.

No one is immune to the pressure to buy food, Nestle says. Companies use sophisticated marketing strategies to introduce young children to their products. "You can even buy textbooks on how to market to children," she says.

These influences are very sad, especially when you think of children, Brownell says. "The fast food and soft drinks in the schools are a disgrace," he says. "Schools make money from the soft drinks companies for having the machines in the schools, and kids are essentially drinking what people call liquid candy."

Sean McBride of the National Soft Drink Association counters that "business-school partnerships are a tremendous asset to the funding of America's education system." He says sedentary lifestyles are to blame for obesity, and there should be daily physical education in schools.

So are the food companies really the bad guys here?

Jeffery says he doesn't think the food industry is intentionally trying to get people to gain weight. "It's not as simple as saying McDonald's is out to get us." Companies are trying to sell products, and they would be happy to sell healthier foods if people would buy them, he says.

Rhona Applebaum of the National Food Processors Association says the goal of industry "is good nutrition and health for everyone. It's in our best interest to have healthy consumers, because healthy consumers live longer, and they are our best consumers."

She thinks consumers should be educated on food selection. "We believe the more products that are available and the more information there is about those products, the greater the chances the consumer will select a healthy diet."

But Brownell says companies are "trying to get us to eat as much as they possibly can, and the consequence of that is being fat."

He believes the food supply has to change. He advocates a tax on junk food, sometimes referred to as the Twinkie Tax or Fat Tax, which would subsidize the price of healthy foods so they cost less.

Grabowski of the Grocery Manufacturers of America says this kind of tax has been tried before in several states and failed because it's hard to decide what gets taxed and what doesn't. "Do peanuts, almonds and cashews get taxed?"

But Brownell thinks the tax would work. "The process of change seems completely daunting, because food habits are so engrained, and the food companies are massively powerful.

"But if you look back 30 years ago, you would have said the tobacco industry was massively powerful, and no one would have thought there was any hope for changes. But now you can't smoke in public places, there are sky-high taxes on cigarettes, and states have sued tobacco companies," Brownell says. "I think we are at the very beginning of a similar movement with food."