

REVERSING OBESITY IN NEW YORK CITY

An Action Plan for Reducing the Promotion and Accessibility of Unhealthy Food

In recent years, obesity has become a growing concern in our city and our nation. In New York City, 56% of adults and more than 40% of elementary school children are overweight or obese. Between 2002 and 2004 alone, New York City adults gained a total of 10 million pounds. Obesity worsens many of the city's most serious health problems including heart disease, stroke, asthma, depression and diabetes. In the last decade, the number of New Yorkers diagnosed with diabetes has increased by 250% and the number of deaths from diabetes has nearly doubled.⁽¹⁾ Moreover, current patterns of obesity and diabetes place a higher burden on the poor and on Blacks and Latinos, widening the gaps in health these groups experience. If these trends continue, our children and grandchildren may have shorter life spans than we do, reversing more than 100 years of public health progress.



Changing this future—helping more people reach healthy weights—requires action to make it easier for all New Yorkers to find healthy affordable food; to move more and find safe and affordable places to exercise, walk, and take part in other forms of daily activity; and to reduce the promotion and convenience of unhealthy food.

New York City is taking many positive steps in the first two areas. The third change, however, is more difficult. In this summary brief, we show how and why unhealthy food is promoted and suggest some actions that the city, nonprofit groups, and residents can take to reduce the promotion and availability of unhealthy food.

UNHEALTHY FOOD AND UNHEALTHY DIETS: WHAT ARE THEY AND HOW DO THEY INFLUENCE OUR HEALTH?

Unhealthy food is hard to define, mainly because we consume individual foods and drinks as part of an overall diet. Here the term “unhealthy food” describes products high in sugar, fat, or sodium (salt) and with few other essential nutrients. This includes packaged convenience foods, fast foods, soft drinks, and snacks. These foods make it easy to eat many more calories than we need, causing weight gain. Over time, this weight gain can lead to other health problems.

UNHEALTHY FOOD PROMOTION IN NEW YORK CITY AND THE UNITED STATES

New Yorkers, especially those living in poor areas, often confront a food environment that encourages unhealthy eating habits.

Consider the following:

- New York City has thousands of fast food restaurants and take-out shops, promoting the purchase of unhealthy food in every neighborhood. In addition, fast food is more common in poor areas than wealthy ones. For example, there are 24 fast-food restaurants per 100,000 residents in East and Central Harlem compared with 8 per 100,000 residents on the wealthier Upper East Side.
- Calorie-for-calorie, unhealthy food costs less than healthy products. Between 2004 and 2006, the average price of high-calorie foods—such as fats, sweets, and snacks—decreased by 1.8%, while the average price of low-calorie foods—mainly fruits and vegetables—increased by 19.5%. Since unhealthy food is cheaper, low-income families are often forced to choose items that can lead to health problems over time.
- For many unhealthy products, portion sizes have grown. Food vendors often rely on “value” marketing by selling large portions for pennies more than the small size, leaving customers feeling as if they got a deal. For example, ordering a medium unbuttered popcorn at a movie theater instead of a small costs just 71 extra cents (23% more money), but buys 500 extra calories (125% more calories). Unfortunately, studies show that the more food we are served, the more we eat.
- In a survey of 10 countries, the U.S. had the highest number of TV ads for sweet and fatty foods for every 20 hours of children's TV. One study found that 8-12 year olds see an average of 230 hours of TV commercials promoting food each year, almost all for foods high in fat, salt, and calories and low in other nutrients.

Photo by Rob Owen-Wahl

- Studies show that children are more likely to request the foods they have seen advertised on TV and that these foods are more likely to be purchased. After reviewing the evidence, The Institute of Medicine concluded that advertising does change kids' food choices and is associated with being overweight.
- Black, Latino, and other communities of color, once ignored by marketers, now constitute desired markets, and some of the unhealthiest products are targeted at these communities. One study found that TV ads seen by Black adolescents promoted many more foods high in sugar, fat, or sodium compared to those seen by White teens.

WHAT THE OTHER SIDE HAS TO SAY: THE ARGUMENTS AGAINST REDUCING PROMOTION OF UNHEALTHY FOOD

In part, the promotion of unhealthy food continues because the food industry and its allies are successful in opposing any control efforts. Here are just a few of the arguments that defenders of the status quo make. By becoming familiar with these and others discussed in the full report¹, advocates of healthier food policies can respond to common arguments against action and encourage a public dialogue on health, individual and corporate responsibility, and the appropriate role for government.

In a free market, it's better for industry to regulate itself than for government to impose rules.

Response: Unfortunately, independent studies show that industry is usually not capable of changing behavior on its own. Corporations are legally obligated to make money for their shareholders. Even if a food company or fast food chain wants to introduce healthier options or decrease marketing to certain sectors of society, they will not be able to if such actions do not lead to a profit. When industry does act to improve nutritional quality, it's usually because of public pressure. Thus, the best way to induce even voluntary change is to press for mandatory standards of responsible conduct.

No food by itself causes obesity. If we eat responsibly, there's no reason to change our diet.

Response: While eating one Whopper (670 calories, 39 grams of fat) won't damage your health permanently, the food industry promotes unhealthy food as a way of life and overeating as desirable. A recent New York City study found that 1.66 million adults (27% of the city's population) drank one or more cans of sugar-sweetened soda a day. Women who drank one or more sodas a day had higher BMIs than women who drank less than one a day, suggesting that sweetened sodas play an important role in pushing many people into the overweight or obese category.

Even if schools restrict access to unhealthy foods, kids will find these foods elsewhere.

Response: Emerging evidence shows that school food policies can help children avoid obesity. In a recent study where sweetened sodas and other unhealthy snacks and drinks were removed from school vending machines, schools had a 50% reduction in the incidence of overweight. Schools should be safe places for children, not food companies. Chil-



Photo by Daniel Modell, Manhattan

WHY DO WE KEEP EATING UNHEALTHY FOOD?

We know that eating foods high in sugar, fat, and sodium increases our risk of obesity, diabetes, and heart disease, yet these products are still marketed and we still eat them. Why? Unhealthy foods are often convenient, taking less time to prepare than a meal using the original ingredients—even though the processed foods may be much higher in calories, fat, sodium, or sugar. In addition, they taste good. Added sugar, fat, and sodium make processed foods appealing and satisfying to eat. Some researchers argue that people are biologically programmed to like these foods, a trait that was useful in times of famine but is toxic today. In addition, unhealthy food is often cheaper than healthier options. Food companies can buy taxpayer-subsidized staple crops like corn and soy at artificially low prices and add them to food items to increase profit. For example, high fructose corn syrup (a sweetener) and hydrogenated soybean oil (a fat) are common in processed and packaged foods and drinks.

dren and their parents should be able to trust that schools are healthy places for learning. Promoting fast food and soda undermines that trust by making schools partners with unhealthy elements.

Food insecurity and hunger are still big problems among New Yorkers. Reducing access to any food could make the poorest New Yorkers even more vulnerable to not getting enough to eat.

Response: Any food policy changes in New York City must reduce both hunger and obesity, as these problems have become increasingly intertwined. Insufficient income and food stamp benefits often force food choices based on cost rather than nutrition and health, and may encourage some people to overeat when they have money and go hungry when it runs out. As obesity becomes concentrated in low-income neighborhoods, its adverse health impact will unfairly burden the poorest city residents. Finding new ways to both reduce the promotion of unhealthy food and the prevalence of hunger can benefit all New Yorkers.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO REDUCE THE PROMOTION OF UNHEALTHY FOODS?

While the promotion of unhealthy food is a massive enterprise with a powerful influence on our political, economic and social systems, every individual and organization has the potential to take action to reduce the scope and impact of this pervasive manipulation. We invite readers to consider these proposals and suggest others.

Vote with your fork

We can all “vote with our forks” by refusing to buy and consume unhealthy foods, thus encouraging food producers to offer healthier products. Individual action is necessary but must be coupled with larger policy and institutional changes.

Create local healthy food zones

Healthy food zones in schools, churches, health centers, and other institutions would not sell, advertise, or promote unhealthy products. These zones would provoke dialogue on the role of promotion of unhealthy food in our current patterns of health and disease.

Use zoning laws to reduce density of unhealthy food outlets

Studies show that the density of fast food outlets is associated with rates of obesity and recently some cities have explored using zoning laws to limit the number of fast food establishments in

low-income neighborhoods with high rates of obesity.

Strengthen oversight of deceptive health claims in food advertising

As people become more concerned about obesity, many food companies seek to sell their products based on health or weight loss claims, even when the scientific foundation for such claims does not exist. To improve health, it is as important to stop unhealthy and misleading messages as it is to give out correct information.

Discourage racial/ethnic targeting of unhealthy food advertisements

Racially and ethnically targeted food industry practices contribute to the inequities in health and obesity among Blacks, Latinos, and Whites and set back efforts to achieve national health goals of reducing health disparities.

Tax unhealthy food such as sweetened soda and other beverages

One study found strong positive associations between the presence of state-level taxation on soft drinks or snack foods between 1991 and 1998 and relative changes in rates of obesity during the same time period. To ensure that these taxes don't unfairly burden the poor, their revenues should be used to subsidize healthy food and support nutrition education in communities with less access to healthy foods.

Support counter-advertising campaigns against unhealthy foods

Nutrition advocates can encourage state and local health departments to sponsor or fund counter-advertising campaigns that encourage people to resist manipulation by the food industry. Advocates can also lobby for the use of free airtime to “inoculate” children against deceptive or misleading food advertising.

Restrict advertising and promotion of unhealthy food

While restrictions on food advertising will face stiff legal opposition, several European countries have shown that it is possible to reduce children's exposure to food advertising. One study recently estimated that a ban on television advertising by fast food restaurants would reduce the number of overweight children aged 3 to 11 by 18%. Another policy option, to eliminate the tax deduction now available to fast food restaurants for their advertising, would reduce the proportion of overweight children and adolescents by 5 to 7%.



ADVOCACY: THE BOTTOM LINE

No single step will solve the multiple and complex health problems that result from the ubiquitous availability and promotion of unhealthy food. We do know, however, that doing nothing or refusing to acknowledge the consequences of the promotion of unhealthy food will allow these practices to continue, magnifying their role in the creation of obesity, diabetes, and other chronic health conditions. In the long run, we can work together to create the food

system we want, one that makes healthy affordable food available to all. If there is any hope in reducing the increasing rates of obesity and the related problems facing NYC, we'll need to confront the continual promotion of unhealthy food. In order to create a healthy food environment—one where healthy foods and messages that support health are more common and easier to choose than unhealthy messages and foods—then we need to act now.

Ten Take Home Messages

1. Diabetes and other obesity-related health problems pose serious and growing health and economic threats to New York City.
2. If we fail to reverse these epidemics, our children and grandchildren will have worse health, shorter life spans, and higher medical costs than we do.
3. Diabetes and obesity pose even heavier burdens on low-income people and on Blacks and Latinos. Halting these epidemics will especially benefit these groups.
4. Improving access to healthy foods and making it easier for people to move more are necessary but not sufficient steps for reducing rates of obesity in NYC.
5. To achieve that goal, we will also need to cut down on the aggressive promotion and easy availability of unhealthy food.
6. In our city and country, the promotion of unhealthy food is pervasive—on television and in other media, in schools, streets, and stores.
7. Each day, we see or hear many more messages encouraging us to eat too much of the wrong foods rather than messages that help us to make healthier food choices.
8. Promotion and availability of unhealthy food, combined with our taste preferences for sweet, salty, and fatty foods and changes in where and how we eat, make it much easier to choose unhealthy rather than healthy diets.
9. No one has the right to create a food environment in which the easy choices doom increasing proportions of our population to obesity, chronic illness, and premature death.
10. Together, NYC residents, elected officials, health professionals, and food advocates can begin to make healthy food choices the easy option. To do this will require taking specific steps to reduce the promotion and availability of unhealthy food.

Who Is This Report For?

This report is for New York City policy makers, advocates, and health professionals as well as anyone who cares about the health of New Yorkers. Its goal is to educate and spark debate on food policy choices for New York.

Who We Are

This report was prepared by the City University of New York Campaign Against Diabetes and the Public Health Association of New York City. The authors are: Lauren Dinour, MPH, RD: public health doctoral student at the Graduate Center, City University of New York; Liza Fuentes, MPH: also a public health doctoral student at the Graduate Center, and Nicholas Freudenberg, DrPH: Distinguished Professor of Public Health, Hunter College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York; and Past President, Public Health Association of New York City

1. References for these and other statements can be found in the full report, *Reversing Obesity in New York City* available at: www.phanyc.org
For more information contact unhealthyfood.cuny@gmail.com