

Portion Sizes and School-Age Children

Sample Op Ed Piece

More calories, more overweight and obesity

Overweight and obesity are the principal public health nutrition problem in the United States, largely because of its ability to increase chronic disease risk and its increasing prevalence among adults and children. The rapidity of the increase is startling. The prevalence has increased sharply just within the past decade. We know that the cause is excess calories consumed over energy expended in daily activities, and that to lose weight, people must consume fewer calories or expend more. At issue is the cause of this increase. Recently investigators have pointed out that one result of our overabundant, overmarketed food supply is an increase in the amounts of food sold and consumed at any one time. Larger portions have more calories, and people tend to eat more when confronted with large amounts of food.

I emphasize calories (rather than fat or sugar) because in my dealings with students, colleagues, the public, and the press about the obesity epidemic, I encounter a surprising conceptual gap: a virtual absence of intuitive understanding that larger portions contribute more calories. Most people seem to view a soft drink as a soft drink, no matter how big it is. When I explain that a 64-ounce soft drink container could provide as much as 800 calories, audiences gasp. If we want to reverse the obesity epidemic, we must get this point across, perhaps by demanding visible calorie labeling in restaurants and fast food establishments, and other policies that address the environment of food choice.

The perfect place to initiate such policies is in our schools. Healthy eating habits start early. Schools are the main providers of away-from-home meals for school-aged children and adolescents, followed by fast food restaurants. Portion sizes of National School Lunch program (NSLP) meals are generally consistent with the serving sizes recommended in the USDA Food Guide Pyramid. However, there are increasing numbers of food and beverage options at school from which students choose their meals and snacks. No nutrition standards apply to these foods, and most are high in fat and sugar, and therefore in total calories. Many of these foods tend to be made available in large portion sizes similar to those served in restaurants or available in the retail sector. We need to engage a group of students, parents, school officials and community leaders to develop standards that address portion sizes for all foods available on school campuses. This will send a clear message to students that healthy eating is a priority for the school and community. It will also provide an environment that supports healthy choices by students.

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