

Food or Not...Who Makes the Rules?

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Most Americans do not know about the negative health effects caused by the processing of their foods. The purpose of this paper is to educate consumers on the risks of eating processed foods and the benefits of eating whole and organic foods. It also offers solutions to the nutrition problems in America, including education programs and government subsidies and regulations. With these solutions in place, the health of Americans would improve, including decreases in obesity, heart disease, diabetes, and many others.

If someone were handing out snacks, and you had the choice between an apple and a piece of cake, which would you choose? Most people would probably choose the cake. It tastes good, it is filling, and it satisfies two of the three natural human taste desires – sugar and fat, the third being salt. What most people do not think about is the fact that, whether store bought or prepared at home, the cake probably contains hydrogenated oil, high-fructose corn syrup, and other additives not naturally found in food. The shortening or margarine used in the cake and the frosting is hydrogenated oil; the sugar is refined; the flour is bleached and milled, and made from wheat grown with pesticides; and the eggs are from chickens that are given antibiotics and growth hormones, and are corn-fed. Most people would choose cake because either they do not know the negative effects these unnatural ingredients have, or they just do not care because they would rather eat what tastes better. Either way, something has to be done about the unhealthy contents of the majority of food in this country. First, more programs need to be put into place to educate people on making healthier food choices. Second, the government needs stricter regulations on what unnatural or modified ingredients can be used in food.

Education is the most important factor in improving our nation's health. If people know what is in their food, the harmful effects unnatural ingredients may cause, and what to do to eat better, they are more apt to make healthier choices. If people knew that the chemicals used in pesticides contain "inactivate enzymes crucial to the nervous and hormonal system, which, at high enough levels of exposure, can lead to symptoms as various as mild anxiety or respiratory paralysis" (Fromartz 1), and long-term exposure can lead to cancer and reproductive disorders, they would probably want to shy away from foods grown with pesticides. Research shows that "the levels of pesticide residues found in organic produce samples were consistently lower than those found in conventional samples" (Givens, et al. 121). Another study reported "73 percent of conventionally grown foods and 90 percent of conventionally grown apples, peaches, pears, strawberries, and celery had pesticide residues, as compared with only 23 percent of organically grown samples" (Singer 200). With these kinds of statistics, it is clear that organic is the safer

and healthier choice. Many people just think that a vegetable is a vegetable, but if they are educated about the difference between conventionally grown and organically grown vegetables, they would know what is going into their bodies, and be able to make an educated choice on what kind of food to buy.

Another issue consumers need to be made aware of is factory farming. The majority of consumers do not know where the meat they eat comes from, or what effect the origin of their meat actually has on their health. Factory-raised cows are fed corn rather than their natural diet of grass and alfalfa in pastures, because corn is cheap and is a readily available commodity crop. Cows that are allowed to graze in pastures, thus eating a grass rich diet, produce beef and milk that are higher in omega-3s, vitamins, and antioxidants (Pollan 167). Allen Trenkle informs viewers that feeding cows a high corn diet when they are meant to eat grass creates *E. coli* that is acid resistant (Food, Inc.). The cows that are corn-fed are packed into pens so close to one another that they can hardly move. In quarters that close, when they excrete their waste, it usually ends up on the other cows near them spreading the contamination. "If one cow has it, the other cows will get it" (Food, Inc.). When those excrement-covered cows are taken to the slaughter, nobody bothers to wash them down. Naturally, some of that excrement makes it into the beef that is produced by those cows. Not only is it just unsanitary that there is cow manure in the nation's beef, but there is also a good chance that the *E. coli* created by a corn diet has passed into that manure, and is now in that beef. The majority of consumers are not aware of these unhealthy practices, but if they were, many more of them would probably choose grass-fed beef rather than the factory farmed variety.

Perhaps the most important issue on which the public must be educated is processed food. It is a broad subject, but it makes up the majority of the diets of most consumers. Has anyone ever stopped to think about why diseases such as cancer, heart disease, and diabetes have increased since the mid-twentieth century? Or why in the late 1800s, a 300 pound man was a circus act because he was the "freakish fat man," but now we regularly see people who weigh 300 pounds or more? The answer is simple and obvious when considered. Food processing was introduced in the mid-twentieth century. In the method of processing foods, good and healthy things, like omega 3 fatty acids, are removed "because of their tendency to oxidize" (Pollan 127) which is the process of incorporating oxygen that makes food spoil, and unhealthy additives, such as trans fats in the form of hydrogenated oils, are added. Unfortunately, many people still do not know that these practices can poorly impact their health. There are still commercials on TV announcing that margarine is better than butter because it has no saturated fat. What they do not say is that they have replaced the saturated fats with trans fats in margarine, which "we now know are more dangerous than the saturated fats they were designed to replace" (Pollan 33). There are advertisements stating that high-fructose corn syrup is nutritionally the same as sugar, and it is fine in moderation. What they do not say is that high-fructose corn syrup has been shown to cause cancer and obesity, and raise insulin, blood pressure, and triglycerides (Planck 224). The ingredients list of most processed foods includes high-fructose corn syrup. For the many Americans who eat mostly processed foods, it is nearly impossible to consume high-fructose corn syrup in moderation, since it is in most of their foods. Many Americans, though, are not aware of this fact, and do not even consider reading the ingredients list. Perhaps the implementation of a warning label, like those on cigarette packages, placed on those foods that

contain harmful substances, would let consumers know what they are eating may be harmful to their health. With better nutritional education, consumers can be aware of what they are consuming. If the dangers are known, more people would be more conscientious about what they are consuming and make better choices.

Better and more substantial nutrition education is surely needed, but a workable method must be employed in doing so. So where to start? Well, start at the beginning – with the children. Children who learn how to make smart choices at a young age are more likely to continue making smart choices as adults, and will also pass that knowledge to their children. That is why teaching nutrition in schools is so important. Schools now do not have adequate, if any, educational programs on nutrition and making smart food choices. Those that are in place consist merely of the antiquated food pyramid system. That system is not nearly sufficient in teaching children what kinds of foods will provide them with the best nutrition, which foods are the safest, and which ones are going to help make their bodies strong rather than breaking them down and promoting disease.

While schools are extremely important in educating children, parents are the first source of learning for a child. Even with proper education in the schools, if parents are not setting the right example, children will not take a lot away from their school lessons, nor have the tools to implement what they have learned. If the parents have never learned how to make smart food choices, they will not be able to teach this to their children. The problem with teaching adults, though, is that unlike children, adults do not go to a major institution like school every day. One way of informing adults is to hold nutritional training seminars in the workplace. This method would only reach a small number of adults, however, since not all adults have jobs, and not all offices would be willing to present the training. The best way to reach the greatest number of people, though not perfect, is through television. There are all kinds of advertisements telling consumers to eat junk food and drink soda, and that margarine and high-fructose corn syrup are good for them. These could be replaced with TV spots that teach viewers about the dangers of processed foods, and inform them on how to make smart food choices.

While it is true that nutrition education is the most important step in improving the health of the nation, it is also true that many people will still make poor choices despite that education. The fact is processed foods are just more convenient. Many people will still grab a burger from a fast-food drive-through, or a meal with friends at a popular chain restaurant, or a doughnut from a convenience store while purchasing gas. These foods are cheap, fast, convenient, prevalent, and enticing. It is very easy to make the wrong choice when that is the only choice in front of a person, or the only choice one can afford. This is why the government needs to step in and take action. They could start by banning the use of hydrogenated oils and high-fructose corn syrup in the production of food. This one simple step would make the choice to eat a pudding cup or a packaged snack cake, or even to drink a soda, a little bit healthier. It would decrease the rate of heart disease, diabetes, and obesity in this country significantly. The next step would be to subsidize fruits and vegetables instead of corn and soybeans. This would not only help in diversifying the American diet, since most processed foods are made from corn and soybeans, but it would also drive down the cost of nutrient-packed produce which is essential to the body's health. This would make it easier for those who only have a meager amount of money to pay for

their meals to eat the foods that will provide them with the proper nutrition. It would also make the choice easier for those who are merely being frugal to spend their money on the healthier choice. Another way for the government to improve the food is to ban factory farms and the use of pesticides in growing crops. As stated earlier, the practices of factory farms are unclean and unhealthy, and are creating and spreading diseases in the food. The use of pesticides introduces poison into people's diets. As previously stated, the use of pesticides has adverse effects that could lead to cancer or other health problems ("Pesticides and Food").

In an ideal world, the government would implement all of these regulations, and everyone would be properly educated and make all of the right food choices. This, however, is the real world. People want to eat what is fast, easy, cheap, and tastes good. There is no perfect way to educate everyone, and many people would not agree to that much government regulation. At the very least, nutrition education programs need to be implemented in public schools, and the government needs to ban the use of hydrogenated oils and high-fructose corn syrup in foods. With a little more knowledge and healthier food choices, maybe we can have our cake and eat it, too.

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