

June 5, 2013, WTE Column. Editor's Headline: "America's Ongoing Nutrition Crisis"

"Eat less red meat," advise nutritionists. "Fresh vegetables and fruit are more conducive to health." Eating several servings of red meat per week increases the risk of premature death from the effects of animal fats. Eating a modest portion of meat only once a week can eliminate much of that risk. Consider this: a 14-ounce ribeye steak (11 ounces when cooked) comprises 3 2/3 servings.

Additionally, excess sodium (salt) intakes kill tens of thousands every year from heart attack and strokes. The average American consumes roughly 3,800 mg of sodium daily, when the limit should be 2,300 mg; for at-risk people, 1,500 mg. Roughly 80 percent of the sodium we consume comes from processed foods: 2 slices of bread have 200 to 400 mg; half a cup of spaghetti sauce has 300 to 600 mg; a can of soup 400 to 600 mg. A typical turkey-breast sandwich with the trimmings goes for 1,650 mg of salt.

Consume more fresh fruits and vegetables: they contain minimal amounts of sodium. But that's easier said than done. The 2013 film, "A Place at the Table," of which more later, illustrates why millions of Americans don't have that option.

Then there's sugar, which is worse than junk food and empty calories. Refined sugars include beet sugar, high-fructose corn syrup, plain corn syrup, dextrose, molasses. The average person in the U.S. takes in about 400 calories a day from refined sugars, much of it via "liquid candy": soft drinks, sports drinks, energy drinks, fruit drinks. The accumulating calories lead to weight gain, diabetes, heart disease, and gout.

Children should consume no more than three teaspoons of added sugars a day—but a six-ounce flavored yogurt contains five teaspoons while a can of coke holds nine. Trix yogurt, which touts itself as "the most fun and colorful" is the choice in many elementary schools.

Campbell, Frito-Lay, Coca-Cola, and other food giants add prodigious amounts of fat, sugar, and salt to their products, never mind the health of their consumers, though the occasional executive does feel pangs of dismay. Jeffrey Dunn, formerly president of Coca-Cola's Western Hemisphere Division, was appalled when he saw his company target children in poor neighborhoods in Brazil. Unable to prevail against the profit-driven ideology handed down from up high, he resigned.

Why do companies like Coca-Cola pitch their noxious products to impoverished families abroad? Because they've saturated the market at home, where the processed-food industry has methodically substituted its wares for nutritious fare.

Thousands of inner-city schools are now ringed with "convenience" stores that don't offer so much as a banana to the youngsters who stop there for snacks. A mother of two, interviewed in the above-mentioned film, explained she rode the bus for an hour to get to a supermarket that stocks fruits and vegetables, then it was an hour of return travel plus the hike from the bus stop to

her apartment, loaded down with groceries. Ironically, she was able to negotiate the healthier food-gathering only as long as she was underemployed; once she held down a full-time job, the hours were no longer available.

“A Place at the Table,” is an award-winning film with appearances by Jeff Bridges, Chef Tom Colichio, and Raj Patel, a visiting scholar at Berkeley. The film shows how and why, in today’s “wealthy” America, one in four children goes hungry. One out of two American children will be on food assistance at one time in their lives. Currently, 49 million Americans “don’t know where their next meal is coming from.” This includes parents who work hard, yet are unable to make ends meet. Often, they rely on charity pantries or soup kitchens. But the fare is salty, starchy, and fatty at soup kitchens, while pantries rely on canned goods and packaged processed food.

The problems are so pervasive, charity is not the answer. The film documents the link between hunger and obesity. “If your budget is stretched to the max, you’re going to buy the cheapest calories you can get,” comments one activist. “And that’s processed food.”

Malnutrition and child obesity are often entwined with female poverty and the status of women. Divorce leaves women in lower socioeconomic strata and with lower wages than their former spouses. Single mothers often work more than one job, which leaves no time to shop for and cook healthy meals. You pick up pizza or open a can of soup.

“This is the first generation who is sicker, and will die younger, than their parents,” testified a nutritionist in a U.S. congressional hearing.

One congressman went for one week on the money an individual receives for food stamps, trying to understand what it’s like to get by on about three dollars a day for food. Apart from the embarrassment and humiliation, the project drove home how impossible it is for the working poor to obtain the food needed to stay healthy.

On the White House lawn, serving nutritious meals to children, 750 chefs converged as First Lady Michelle Obama spoke movingly on the need to ensure children’s food security. After scores of parents and educators testified before Congress, what was the result? Congress increased funding per school meal by a few cents—as if pennies could attain fresh vegetables and fruit at school.

Some members of Congress hold erroneous notions about the working poor, which invites food lobbyists’ dollars while denying help to desperate constituents. But elected officials are not the only culprits. We who vote them into office bear responsibility as well.

“If another country were doing this to our kids, we would be at war,” comments Jeff Bridges. “And it doesn’t have to be this way.”

Avoid red meat. Eat fresh fruits and vegetables. How to accomplish this on the time- and money constraints most of us battle? Ah, there’s the rub.