

**May 29, 2013, WTE Column. Editor's Headline: "You Are what You Eat"**

Our obesity epidemic is visible everywhere, and that's no accident. Big Food has crafted foods of little nutritional value that keep consumers reaching for more. Children suffer the condition with grave consequences—not only for American families but also for the healthcare industry. Ultimately, it's the taxpayers who foot the bill.

It would be better if we thought of overweight people as undernourished. According to the Journal of American College of Nutrition, only 25 percent of children meet the daily recommendations for fruit and vegetable intake. The resulting deficiencies are what one might associate with developing countries. But with America? Where supermarket shelves overflow with alluring offerings?

That allure, however, is part of the problem. Grocery shelves are stacked, all right—stacked against responsible consumption.

And the bad news doesn't just pertain to children. Across the generations, while our calorie intake is way up, consumption of essential nutrients—vitamins, minerals, fiber—is down. In other words, our bodies get more food but less nutrition. Refined grains, added fats and sugars, and all sorts of additives bloat waistlines but do nothing for a body's health.

The following cross-generational data comes from the Nationwide Food Consumption Survey: Between 1977 and 1996, salty snack portions increased by 49 calories, meaning when you give your kid the same snack you may have enjoyed when you were ten—an individual bag of chips, say, with a soda ("fruit" juices often fall into this category also)—your child ingests 142 more calories than you did. Do this twice a week and, within a year, your child will weigh an extra pound more than you did back when.

It's always been true, of course: a liberal intake of food does not necessarily mean good nutrition. However, in past years, groceries were expensive enough to make us choose carefully. Today, processed foods are cheap. When the family budget is limited—whose isn't, these days, among working Americans?—the temptation is to reach for the inexpensive stuff, particularly when shopping on the way home from work, thinking of preparing a meal.

Trying to eat less is not the answer. No one likes to feel deprived. We can, however, be mindful of more healthful snacks. One family solved the problem by requiring its children to ask permission to snack—but not when the snack was a piece of fruit or a handful of natural nuts. The children could reach for these anytime they wanted to munch on something in between meals.

I keep handy the book "Eat THIS not THAT for Kids" (a twin volume exists for adults), which features colorful, easy-to-understand illustrations for the youngsters; e.g. Campbell's SpaghettiOs (180 calories, 1g fat) as opposed to Kraft's Macaroni & Cheese (410 calories, 19g fat). It's dedicated "To all parents trying their best to make smart choices for their children."

Besides rating an array of foods—the section on breakfast cereals is an eye opener—the booklet rates chain restaurants, Mexican to Thai. Today, restaurant foods account for more than one-third of our calories, we're told.

Since the 1970s, “the typical serving size for soft drinks has increased by 49 calories, for French fries by 68 calories, for hamburgers by 97 calories.”

The small book includes “The 20 Worst Kids’ Foods in America.” Sadly, one of these items is an Oscar Meyer Lunchables, the kind often distributed through schools to children at risk for hunger. Equally sadly, no thanks to U.S. subsidies to the livestock industry, “you can buy a Big Mac for half the cost of a fresh cantaloupe.”

Besides the report-card grades, there are “Hidden Danger” comments for each restaurant. Consider Chuck E. Cheese’s Hi-C for kids: “Hi-C is not juice. In fact, it has more sugar per ounce than coke. And with Chuck’s free refills flowing, the calories add up fast.”

McDonald’s Happy Meal “is a punishing blow” to a child, with “more fat and calories than an active adult man, let alone a kid, should take in from a single meal.” And Taco Bell’s Fiesta Taco Salad “packs as much fat as 15 slices of bacon.”

The good news is that all the restaurants evaluated have items on the menu the authors endorse unstintingly; these are delineated under “Eat THIS.”

Other sections of the book give pointers on wise shopping for groceries, which includes the advice to never shop on an empty stomach; you will be led by your nose. “Whole Foods Markets are geniuses at the ‘scents-make-sense’ game . . . directly tied to your wallet.”

Don’t buy cereals with added raisins; these are coated with sugar. Instead, add regular raisins to the bran cereal of your choice.

The book suggests eight rules to help us “paddle through the Nutritional Ocean.” First, the analogy appears that parents and caregivers are a big group in one side of a boat, bailing out water “as fast as we can,” while America’s food marketers—the small group on the other side—are busily punching holes into the ship’s hull. In the battle against obesity, that’s what the food industry is doing “to us, to our children, and to our county.”

The number one rule is “Never skip breakfast. Ever.” Children skip breakfast more than any other meal, and skipping is more prevalent in girls. As grown-ups, “People who skip breakfast are more likely to take up smoking or drinking, less likely to exercise, and more likely to follow fad diets.”

“Snack with a purpose” is the second rule. We are a nation of mindless eaters, but this rule aims to change habits one individual at a time.

“Beware of Portion Distortion,” Rule #3, reiterates the truisms observed above.

The book is a good read for anyone, young and not-so-young.