

The Athlete's Kitchen

By Nancy Clark, MS RD CSSD

Reforming *YOUR* Healthcare Policy: Food For Thought

Healthcare reform is a hot topic these days, not only in the news but also (hopefully) in your personal life. You likely already know that by eating well, exercising at least 150 minutes a week, and not smoking, you can reduce the risk of an early death by 80%. (That's a lot, eh?!) But your friends and family may not fully appreciate how much slacking off, underexercising, and gaining undesired body fat too easily leads to negative health consequences that cost us millions of dollars.

Losing excess body fat is important because fat is an active tissue, not just a bank account of extra calories. Fat cells create an inflammatory response that contributes to heart disease, cancer, and diabetes. Fat also produces a hormone, leptin, that affects appetite. Leptin sends signals to the brain to stop eating. Hence, the brain and the intestinal tract are highly connected. Unfortunately, the brain developed in ancient times when food was scarce and unpredictable. This might explain why the body stores fat easily, yet sheds fat with greater difficulty.

To address nutrition, obesity, and health concerns, experts discussed the latest research at the 4th Annual Symposium of Tuft's University's Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy (Boston, Sept. '09). Perhaps this information will inspire you and your loved ones to take an active role in preserving your good health for a robust and lengthy lifespan.

Food Shopping Reform

Good nutrition starts in the supermarket. Unfortunately, you almost have to have a PhD in nutrition to know which groceries to buy. But this is changing. For example, the Smart Choices food ranking system (www.SmartChoicesProgram.com) is now on the front of many food packages. This program gives a check mark to foods that meet certain criteria (rich in vitamins, fiber; low in sodium, added sugar, trans fat, etc.). Participation in Smart Choices is voluntary, yet many of the major food companies are participating.

Hannaford Supermarket has created a Guiding Star system that ranks foods according to the nutrients we want to eat more of (calcium, iron, fiber) and those we should eat less of (saturated fat, trans fat, sodium). Signs in the marketplace indicate if a food has one, two or three stars. Would you believe 77% of the foods in grocery stores do not qualify for even one Hannaford Guiding Star? This indicates how health-eroding our food supply is! Let's hope that companies whose products fail to earn even one star might quietly start tweaking their recipes to create healthier products...

As a result of the Guiding Stars food ranking system, Hannaford customers are actually shifting their shopping patterns. They are now buying more of the best foods (nutrient-dense and locally grown) and less of the rest. The hope is better food labeling, along with consumer education, will help Hannaford shoppers shave off 100 to 200 calories a day. This small change can lead to losing 10 to 20 pounds fat in a year. This is a sure way to chip away at the obesity epidemic.

Obesity: a huge problem

A simple look around the mall confirms this fact: Obesity is rising to epidemic proportions. Despite years of advice from health professionals to add on exercise and eat fewer calories, obesity rates continue to increase. Reducing the prevalence of obesity will take years, because we need to change many systems. That is, restaurants need to serve smaller portions; kids need to be able to walk safely to school; food manufacturers need to make products with less fat and calories; housing developments need to be designed so people can walk to stores, as opposed to drive to the mall. All of this takes time, coordination, planning, and policy.

In the meantime, what can you do? You can implement small but sustainable changes that you can happily maintain for the rest of your life. The changes might have more to do with lifestyle than food—and what you choose to do with your feet, not just your fork. Here's a little of what we know:

We need to live in neighborhoods that encourage walking, biking, and public transportation. As you have undoubtedly noticed, walkability has been engineered out of your life. Busy streets and highways now divide neighborhoods that used to be vibrant communities. We have created lifestyles that focus on the automobile. No longer can most of us walk to stores, the post office, and to work; instead, we need to drive cars. To shop, we drive to malls; this takes people out of cities and dissolves the communities that get created when neighbors interact while walking outside.

Even schools are being built away from the center of town because there is more land (the required 40 acres). This ties kids to school busses. Some schools have started parking the busses farther away from the classrooms, so the kids at least get a little more exercise before and after school.

Preventing health problems

Preventing obesity and the diseases of aging (which are really diseases of inactivity and overnutrition) is far easier than fixing health problems. The standard recommendations to exercise more and eat less are seemingly ineffective. To our detriment, (over)eating is pleasing. In comparison, food deprivation is less attractive. We need to find ways to lose undesired body fat without feeling deprived or punished.

Preventing weight gain needs to start early. Given that 25% of today's kids ages two to five years old are overfat or obese (as are 33% of school-age kids), waiting until kids enter the school system is too late to deal with the problem. Prevention offers an opportunity to improve the child's health, reduce disease, save money. An obese child with at least one obese parent is very likely to become an obese adult...

Prevention of undesired fat gain can start as early as infancy. For example, sleep deprivation is a known contributor to weight gain—even in infants. Research indicates infants who routinely sleep less than 11 hours a night are more likely to be overweight than those who sleep more than 13 hours. This means, if you are a working parent, don't keep your kids up too late, just so you can enjoy a little bit more family time!

The bottom line

Health care reform needs to start on the personal level. While you may live an active lifestyle, others need encouragement to take responsibility and be more active, eat wisely, sleep well, and stay well!

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