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English 1010

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Obesity: Who Or What Is To Blame?

The Obesity rate in this country has reached epidemic levels. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 1/3 of adults in the U.S. are obese and 12.5 million children and adolescents. Obesity related diseases such as stroke, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and certain cancers are on the rise. These diseases are some of the leading causes of preventable death. There are many different opinions about what is causing the obesity problem. I have had my own personal experience with obesity. When I was in high school, poor eating habits and the lack of exercise lead to me gaining a substantial amount of weight. Interestingly, my family owns a fast-food restaurant and I have worked there since I was a young boy. My dad has been obese his whole adult life and suffers from many health problems because of it. One day I had the realization that I was turning into my father, and from that point forward I began to change my lifestyle. I lost 88 pounds within a 4 month period. Because of my experience with obesity and working in the fast-food industry, it has led me to the question, "Who or what is to blame for obesity?" The following articles provide diverse viewpoints on this subject and will help to answer my question.

In this paper I will address several topics as they relate to the obesity epidemic. These topics will include; the fast-food industry, eating habits, childhood obesity, and regulation versus personal responsibility.

Fast-Food Industry

There are varying opinions on whether the fast-food industry is the cause of the obesity epidemic. Research published by Young and Nestle found that the availability of fast-food is unprecedented compared to just a few decades ago. They provide evidence that indicates portion sizes are contributing to the obesity problem. The study showed that there has been a significant increase in portion sizes since the 1970s. For instance; French fries at McDonalds in the past were only offered in one size. That French fry is now the smallest size available at the restaurant today. Not only are Americans eating out more, but they are frequently being exposed to new and larger products. In fact, people are choosing restaurants based on the size of the food portions. Young and Nestle suggest that education and other public health programs are needed to address the food trends that are currently contributing to obesity.

A similar viewpoint is shared in “Don’t Blame the Eater” by David Zinczenko. He talks about the growing rate of childhood obesity and its connection with the fast-food industry. He states that there is a higher availability of fast-food places than healthier places to eat or to get healthy food. From his own experience as a young man who came from a broken family, he had to find his own means of food because his mom worked all day. This situation often led him to choose unhealthy food at convenient fast-food restaurants. Radley Balko, a renowned writer doesn’t necessarily disagree that portion sizes are larger today or that fast-food is highly available, but he does not agree that the fast-food industry is to blame for the obesity epidemic. He blames people’s poor choices for the problem.

Another issue that is tied to portion size is the fast-food industries desire to make more money. One of the reasons why portion sizes have grown so dramatically over the last several decades is price competition. Larger portions bring more market share. Survey results in the study done by Young and Nestle found that consumers equate value with portion size.

Customers want more food for their money. The fast-food industry today is a multi-billion dollar industry that has integrated itself into the American culture and possibly done so at the expense of the people's health.

Eating Habits

The eating habits in America have changed along with the portion sizes. Eating habits stem from many different influences. One of these influences is explained by Michael Pollan, a professor at the University of California at Berkley, he believes that we should get rid of the Western diet. In his opinion, the problem with the Western diet is that we focus too much on nutritionalism or in other words individual nutrients such as fats, carbohydrates or antioxidants instead of whole foods. He believes this is what is causing the obesity epidemic in our country. As a solution to the problem, he proposes three rules, "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly Plants" (Pollan p.440). I agree with his rejection of dieting and nutritionalism in general and that we need to simplify what we eat in a way that is similar to how our ancestors used to eat. Another thing that influences eating habits is the media. Research by Victor Strasburger a renowned pediatrician and Chief of the Division of Adolescence Medicine at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine, revealed that people tend to snack while they are watching television. Furthermore, the advertising for unhealthy foods on TV is marketed toward children.

Childhood Obesity

Most people would agree that childhood obesity is a major concern. Research conducted by Strasburger suggests that media plays a large role in the cause of obesity. He found four specific causes; first, time spent in front of the television means less time that children are engaged in physical activities. Many studies have found that physical activity decreases as screen time

increases. Second, eating behavior is imbedded in programming on television as well as in the advertising of unhealthy food. Strasburger's research found that 80 percent of all advertisements in children's programming are for fast-foods or snacks. Zinczenko has a similar standpoint concerning marketing unhealthy foods to children and he thinks that it would be wise for fast-food companies to include nutritional facts labels on their products. According to Zinczenko, without these labels or warnings we will keep seeing the obesity rate grow in children and adults. The third cause that Strasburger has identified is that people tend to snack while they are watching television programs. Fourth, too much television viewing can interfere with sleep patterns, which is a known risk factor for obesity. It has been found that viewing three or more hours per day of television doubles the risk of difficulty falling asleep. Sleep loss has been linked to excessive eating. Unlike Zinczenko, Strasburger believes that a possible solution to this problem is that regulation should be placed on advertising unhealthy food in children's programming. I agree with Strasburger that there should be some sort of regulation placed on advertising unhealthy foods during children's television programs. Children are learning and developing so much at a young age, and if they are exposed to unhealthy food and eating habits almost daily, then they will most likely follow those eating trends that they were exposed to. Which could lead to being obese as an adult.

Regulations vs. Personal Responsibility

There are differing opinions on the solutions to solving the obesity epidemic. Balko presents the issue of how the government feels they need to control the growing rate of obesity. He states that the government is initiating new anti-obesity restrictions on junk food in school vending machines, more demanding labels on food, and restrictive food marketing to children.

In other words, the government wants to tell you how to eat. Balko feels that the government is fighting obesity in the wrong way. Instead of the government providing a small variety of food options available to consumers, they should be working on getting people to take personal responsibility for what they are eating. In Balko's words, "your well-being, shape, and condition have increasingly been deemed matters of 'public health,' instead of matters of personal responsibility" (p.396). He further states that insurance companies throughout the United States are not charging overweight or obese clients higher premiums, which in turn cause clients to have little or no financial incentive for maintaining a healthy lifestyle. People assume that if the government is paying for the medication needed, then what is the incentive for them to eat the right foods? He believes if we want to fight obesity, the attempt towards the socialization of medicine needs to be put to a stop so that Americans can gain ownership of their own health.

In completing the research for this paper, I found that Balko's position on obesity was fairly unique compared to the information I found from other sources. For example, Strasburger advocates for regulations to be placed on advertising unhealthy food in children's programming. Young and Nestle believe the solution is education and public health programs that address food trends. Zinczenko would like to see labels and warnings on fast-food products that are marketed to children. I think that all of these standpoints on obesity are relevant and have very good points. But, I would have to primarily agree with Balko. The only way to fight obesity is to make it a personal problem instead of a public issue. I think that personal responsibility lies at the root of obesity and the only way to fight it is through personal accountability in keeping yourself physically fit and healthy. This is what I have found in my quest for a healthy life.

In conclusion, all of the articles I reviewed presented a cause or placed blame on organizations or industries for the obesity problem in the U.S. They all presented valid points,

but none of them could answer my research question in full. Each article provided only a piece of evidence or explanation. While some of the articles had similar themes, each one of them provided a very different solution to the problem. This is not a subject that is going to have a clear solution. I have learned that fast-food can contribute to obesity, but it can't be blamed for causing obesity. I work at my family restaurant full time and eat there nearly every day. Yet, I have maintained my 88 pound weight loss for 2 years now. I'm living proof that fast-food restaurants can coexist with healthy people.

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