

No Easy Path To Solving America's Obesity Problems



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A couple of years ago, I received an email from an Oregon high school student who was searching the internet for information on one of America's biggest domestic challenges: Obesity. She had a basic question for me: Was former Secretary of

Agriculture Earl Butz responsible for obesity in America?

I receive hundreds of emails every day but this one took me by surprise. I couldn't figure out how anyone would think that one man, who served as Secretary of Agriculture from 1971 to 1976, could be blamed for the fact that millions of kid's these days would rather play video games than play outside. Or how could you deny that thousands of schools have cut or severely reduced the amount of time that students are required to have physical activity?

Of course, Butz was featured in the documentary King Corn, and linked to the start of "fence row to fence row" planting and the advent of modern corn production practices, which the producers used to blame for obesity. Before she connected with me, King Corn was about the extent of her research. Sadly, it's often the only thing many of today's high school students learn about farming.

Now, a new report debunks some of the overly simplistic and erroneous connections that sensationalists use to criticize modern day agriculture. U.S. farm policy has influenced what consumers purchase, but it's probably not the terrible villain or the ultimate savior that some would point to.

In fact, there is no "silver bullet" when it comes to addressing America's obesity epidemic, according to a report from an Institute of Medicine (IOM) Committee. They describe obesity as a "complex health problem" that requires a "comprehensive set of solutions working together to spur across-the-board societal change."

Chaired by former Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman, the committee evaluated more than 800 prior obesity-prevention strategies and identified recommendations to accelerate progress, including further examination of the links between farm policy, agricultural research and obesity.

Glickman described obesity as "a public health issue of monumental importance to the nation," because of the huge number of people it affects, the relationships between obesity and debilitating and costly chronic diseases and the future impact on health care cost challenges in the U.S.

Two-thirds of adults and one-third of children are overweight or obese, according to the IOM. "Left unchecked, obesity's effects on health, health care costs, and our productivity as a nation could become catastrophic. The staggering human toll of obesity-related chronic disease and disability and an annual cost of \$190.2 billion for treating obesity-related illness underscore the urgent need to strengthen obesity prevention efforts in the U.S."

The 462-page report, which was sponsored by

the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, was released Tuesday at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's "Weight of the Nation" conference, focuses on five critical goals for preventing obesity. They include integrating physical activity into people's daily lives, making more healthy food and beverage options available, transforming marketing and messages about nutrition and activity, making schools a gateway to healthy weights, and galvanizing employers and health care professionals to support healthy lifestyles.

Specific strategies include requiring at least 60 minutes per day of physical activity in schools, industry-wide guidelines on which foods and beverages can be marketed to children, expansion of workplace wellness programs, taking full advantage of physicians' roles to advocate for obesity prevention with patients and in the community, and increasing the availability of lower-calorie, healthier children's meals in restaurants.

"As the trends show, people have a very tough time achieving healthy weights when inactive lifestyles are the norm and inexpensive, high-calorie foods and drinks are readily available 24 hours a day," said Glickman.

The report proposes voluntary strategies aimed at supporting everyone's ability to make healthy choices where they work, learn, eat and play, but calls on government agencies to set mandatory rules, if needed, to get food companies and marketers to support changes. For example, "the food, beverage, restaurant and media industries should step up their voluntary efforts to develop and implement common nutritional standards for marketing aimed at children and adolescents up to age 17. Government agencies should consider setting mandatory rules if a majority of these industries have not adopted suitable standards within two years," the report noted.

The report also calls on Congress, the Obama administration and federal agencies to more broadly examine U.S. agricultural policy, evaluating evidence between the farm bill and the American diet, while "looking for ways to better support the nation's changing food and nutrition needs."

"Whether and how farm policy is related to the obesity epidemic are questions research has only recently begun to explore, and a definitive evidence base has not yet emerged," the report notes. "But a consensus does appear to be developing around two key points: first, blunt approaches such as eliminating farm subsidies are unlikely to offer a quick fix to the obesity epidemic; and second, there are real opportunities to adjust farm policies in meaningful ways to better support the nation's changing food and nutrition needs."

The report's blueprint for action was released in conjunction with the new "Weight of the Nation" initiative, which includes a new book, "The Weight of the Nation: To Win We Have to Lose," and a multipart HBO documentary on obesity in America, debuted on May 14 and 15. Δ

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