

Fast Food Should Not Be Blamed for Obesity

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"A fast food burger may not enhance your health ... but it is very easy to find out how fatty that burger is."

In the following viewpoint Todd G. Buchholz argues that fast-food restaurants have been unfairly blamed for rising obesity rates. He maintains that people are gaining weight because they are snacking more at home or eating at sit-down restaurants. Moreover, according to Buchholz, consumers today have a wider choice of healthy fast-food options and therefore cannot accuse fast-food restaurants if they get fat from eating higher-fat products. Buchholz was an economic adviser in the George H.W. Bush administration.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. Why does the author believe the rise in Body Mass Index between the nineteenth century and 1960 was a modern victory?
2. What proportion of calories is consumed at home, according to Buchholz?
3. According to the author, why have fast-food restaurants expanded their menus?

[In 2003] the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York responded to a complaint filed against McDonald's by a class of obese customers, alleging among other things that the company acted negligently in selling foods that were high in cholesterol, fat, salt, and sugar. In the past 10 years we have seen an outburst of class action lawsuits that alleged harm to buyers. With classes numbering in the thousands, these suits may bring great riches to tort lawyers, even if they provide little relief to the plaintiffs. The sheer size of the claims and the number of claimants often intimidate defending firms, which fear that their reputations will be tarnished in the media and their stock prices will be punished—not because of the merits but from the ensuing publicity. In his opinion in the McDonald's case, Judge Robert W. Sweet suggested that the McDonald's suit could "spawn thousands of similar 'McLawsuits' against restaurants." Recent books with titles like *Fat Land* and *Fast Food Nation* promote the view that fast food firms are harming our health and turning us into a people who are forced to shop in the "big and tall" section of the clothing stores. The *Wall Street Journal* recently reported that "big and tall" has become a \$6 billion business in menswear, "representing more than a 10 percent share of the total men's market."

But before the legal attack on fast food gets too far along, it would be useful to look at the facts behind fast food and fat America and to ask whether the courtroom is really the place to determine what and where people should eat. ...

The Rise in Body Mass Index

If you believe the old saying "you are what you eat," human beings are not what they used to be. Before jumping into today's fashionable condemnation of calories, let us spend a moment on historical perspective and at least admit that for mankind's first couple hundred thousand years of existence, the basic human problem was how to get enough calories and micronutrients. Forget the caveman era: As recently as 100 years ago, most people were not receiving adequate nutrition. Malnutrition was rampant,

stunting growth, hindering central nervous systems, and making people more susceptible to disease. Often, poor people begged on the streets because they did not have the sheer physical energy to work at a job, even if work was available to them. By modern standards even affluent people a century ago were too small, too thin, and too feeble, as economist Robert W. Fogel has noted. A century ago, an American with some spare time and spare change was more likely to sign up for a weight-gaining class than a weight-loss program.

Just as life expectancy in the United States rose almost steadily from about 47 years in 1900 to 80 years today, so too has the "Body Mass Index," or BMI, a ratio of height to weight. In the late nineteenth century, most people died too soon and were, simply put, too skinny. The two are related, of course. For most of human history only the wealthy were plump; paintings of patrons by Peter Paul Rubens illustrated that relationship. In ancient times figurines of Venus (carved thousands of years ago) displayed chunky thighs, big bellies, and BMIs far above today's obesity levels. Likewise, skinny people looked suspicious to the ancients. (Remember that the backstabbing Cassius had a "lean and hungry look.") The rise in the BMI from the nineteenth century to about 1960 should be counted as one of the great social and medical victories of modern times. In a sense, it created a more equal social status, as well as a more equal physical stature.

So what went wrong more recently? It is not the case that the average BMI has suddenly accelerated. In fact, the BMI has been rising fairly steadily for the past 120 years. Nonetheless, since the 1960s the higher BMI scores have surpassed the optimal zone of about 20 to 25. No doubt, a more sedentary lifestyle adds to this concern. (In contrast, the healthy rise in BMIs during the early 1900s might be attributed to gaining more muscle, which weighs more than fat.) The post-1960s rise in BMI scores is similar to a tree that grows 12 inches per year but in its tenth year starts casting an unwanted shadow on your patio. In the case of people, more mass from fat has diminishing returns, cutting down their life spans and raising the risk for diabetes, heart disease, gallbladder disease, and even cancer. Over half of American adults are overweight, and nearly a quarter actually qualify as obese, according to the National Institutes of Health.

Should we chiefly blame fast food for BMIs over 25? According to the caricature described by lawyers suing fast food companies, poor, ill-educated people are duped by duplicitous restaurant franchises into biting into greasy hamburgers and french fries. The data, however, tell us that this theory is wrong. If the "blame fast food" hypothesis were correct, we would see a faster pace of BMI growth among poorly educated people, who might not be able to read or understand nutritional labels. In fact, college-educated people—not the poorly educated—accounted for the most rapid growth in BMI scores between the 1970s and the 1990s. (Poorly educated people have a higher overall incidence of obesity.) The percentage of obese college-educated women nearly tripled between the early 1970s and the early 1990s. In comparison, the proportion of obese women without high school degrees rose by only 58 percent. Among men, the results were similar. Obesity among those without high school degrees climbed by about 53 percent, but obesity among college graduates jumped by 163 percent. If the "blame fast food" hypothesis made sense, these data would be flipped upside down.

The Sources of Additional Calories

Of course, we cannot deny that people are eating more and getting bigger, but that does not prove that fast food franchises are the culprit. On average, Americans are eating about 200 calories more each day

than they did in the 1970s. ...

So where are the 200 additional calories coming from? The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has compiled the "Continuing Survey of Food Intakes by Individuals," which collects information on where a food was purchased, how it was prepared, and where it was eaten, in addition to demographic information such as race, income, age, and sex. The survey shows that the answer is as close as the nearest salty treat. Americans are not eating bigger breakfasts, lunches, or dinners—but they are noshing and nibbling like never before. Between the 1970s and the 1990s, men and women essentially doubled the calories consumed between meals (by between 160 and 240 calories). In 1987-88, Americans typically snacked less than once a day; by 1994 they were snacking 1.6 times per day. But surely, opponents of fast food would argue, those cookies and pre-wrapped apple pies at McDonald's must account for calories. Again the data fail to make their case. Women ate only about six more snack calories at fast food restaurants, while men ate eight more snack calories, over the past two decades. That is roughly equal to one Cheez-It cracker or a few raisins. Where do Americans eat their between-meal calories? Mostly at home. Kitchen cabinets can be deadly to diets. And in a fairly recent development, supermarket shoppers are pulling goodies off of store shelves and ripping into them at the stores before they even drive home. Consumers eat two to three times more goodies inside stores than at fast food restaurants.

Food Is More Affordable

Why are people eating more and growing larger? For one thing, food is cheaper. From an historical point of view that is a very good thing. A smaller portion of today's family budget goes to food than at any time during the twentieth century. In 1929, families spent 23.5 percent of their incomes on food. In 1961, they spent 17 percent. By 2001, American families could spend just 10 percent of their incomes on food, according to the USDA's Economic Research Service. The lower relative cost of food made it easier, of course, for people to consume more.

Since the mid-1980s we have seen an interesting change in restaurant pricing, which has made restaurants more attractive to consumers. Compared to supermarket prices, restaurant prices have actually fallen since 1986. Whereas a restaurant meal was 1.82 times the cost of a store-bought meal in 1986, by 2001 a restaurant meal cost just 1.73 times as much. Higher incomes and lower relative restaurant prices have induced people to eat more, and to eat more away from home.

Despite the attraction of restaurant eating and the proliferation of sit-down chain restaurants such as the Olive Garden, TGI Friday's, P.F. Chang's, and others, Americans still consume about two-thirds of their calories at home. Critics of fast food spend little time comparing fast food meals to meals eaten at home, at schools, or at sit-down restaurants. ...

Very few defenders of fast food would tell moms and dads to throw out the home-cooked meal and instead eat 21 meals a week at White Castle. But it is a mistake to stereotype fast food as simply a cheeseburger and a large fries. Fast food restaurants have vastly expanded their menus for a variety of reasons including health concerns and demographic shifts. The increasing role of Hispanic Americans in determining national food tastes has inspired many fast food franchises to offer tacos, burritos, and salsa salads. Wendy's, traditionally known for its square-shaped hamburgers, offers a low-fat chili dish that the Minnesota attorney general's office recommended as a "healthier choice" in its fast food guide.

McDonald's has continuously revamped its menu in recent years. On March 10, 2003, the company unveiled a new line of "premium salads" that feature Newman's Own All-Natural Dressings. In its publicity blitz, McDonald's facetiously asked, "What's Next? Wine Tasting?" Meanwhile Burger King features broiled chicken teriyaki in addition to its traditional fare. Judge Sweet noted that the Subway sandwich chain, which boasts of healthy choices, hired a spokesman who apparently lost 230 pounds of weight while eating the "Subway Diet." In fact, fast food meals today derive fewer calories from fat than they did in the 1970s. Consumers can customize their fast food meals, too. Simply by asking for "no mayo," they may cut down fat calories by an enormous proportion. It is worth pointing out that fast food firms introduced these alternative meals in response to changing consumer tastes, not in reply to dubious lawsuits. During the 1990s, McDonald's and Taco Bell invested millions of dollars trying to develop low-fat, commercially viable selections such as the McLean Deluxe hamburger and Taco Bell's Border Lights. Burger King adopted its "Have It Your Way" slogan several decades ago. ...

Consumers Deserve Choices

Faced with the conundrum of changing tastes and nutritional recommendations, Judge Sweet shrewdly took up the distinction between an inherently dangerous meal and a meal that may pose some legitimate risk, if only from over-consumption. The Restatement (Second) of Torts explained that "Ordinary sugar is a deadly poison to some diabetics" and that "Good whiskey is not unreasonably dangerous merely because it will make some people drunk, and is especially dangerous to alcoholics; but bad whiskey, containing a dangerous amount of fuel oil, is unreasonably dangerous." These risks are not good reasons to outlaw good sugar or good whiskey. Fried fish may be oily, but that does not mean it is contaminated. Absent a truly compelling and sweeping health reason, we should not let lawsuits rob consumers of choices. ...

Let us be frank here. Depending on what you pile on it, a fast food burger may not enhance your health, and it may even hinder your ability to run a marathon—but it is very easy to find out how fatty that burger is. You do not need a lawyer by your side to pry open a brochure or to check the thousands of websites that will provide nutrition data. While it is unlikely that nutritionists will soon announce that super-sized double cheeseburgers will make you thin, society should not allow the latest fads or the most lucrative lawsuits to govern what we eat for lunch.

Further Readings

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