Obesity and the Role of Fast Food

It’s a sensitive subject, a faux pas in social conversation, but it’s prime time for Americans to start talking about their weight. As health costs rise and Baby Boomers near the threshold of Medicare en masse, national focus must turn to the scales hidden in bathroom closets. Smoking and drinking are commonly blamed in courts of law and opinion as contributors to health problems, but obesity, an equally dangerous and more widespread affliction, is commonly overlooked.

Americans seem to know that fast food is not nutritious, but just how aware are consumers of the significance of what they put on their tray? Studies conducted by the Surgeon General and National Research Council found that ‘cardiovascular disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes and obesity are linked to excessive intake of calories, fat, cholesterol and sodium.’ These findings haven’t stopped Americans from consuming larger portions of unhealthy prepared and fast foods. Why?

This may be attributed to a lack of nutritional content or ingredient labels on fast food packaging; there is nothing disclosing that a Happy Meal (burger, fries and drink) has half the calories and all the fat and sodium an adult needs daily. There ought to be. If the regular consumption of a mass-produced, standardized, commercial product can lead to serious health risks, the consumer must be clearly advised. The present failure to do so is cause for concern.

Large health interest groups such as the American Heart Association and the American Cancer Society have long worked to educate Americans about proper diet and the health consequences of eating fast food. But they have had only limited success. The restaurant industry’s powerful advertising and lobbying efforts overshadow health interest groups and continue to whet national taste buds and shape policy.

The most controversial topics being debated are the aforementioned nutritional and ingredient labeling of fast food products and whether fast food chains ought to be allowed in school cafeterias. In 1985 when nutritional labeling first became required on pre-packaged food, the FDA [Food and Drug Administration] favored the National Restaurant Association lobbyists who claimed that costs were prohibitive rather than listen to health officials or consult the public. Government should not yield to business interests in matters of national health. State and federal governments must mandate the disclosure of nutritional information and ingredients on fast food packaging so that the public becomes better informed about the health risks of what they put on their plate. With easy access to information, consumers can better moderate their fast food choices and pressure restaurants to provide more nutritious alternatives.

Work Cited


Reference