

The McBlame Game: Would YOU Like Fries With That? :

The debate of blaming the fast food industry for obesity versus consumer responsibility

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In 2008, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that 1.4 billion adults aged 20 and over were overweight. Of this 1.4 billion, over 200 million men and close to 300 million women were obese. For many people these days, fast food is a handy way to enjoy a meal when pressed for time. It is becoming more and more of a familiar sight now than in previous years. Since 1980, worldwide obesity has almost doubled. Obesity is a major concern for many individuals and healthcare providers. The health problems associated with obesity have huge economic impacts on the healthcare system and its related medical costs. There is constant debate as to why obesity is so prevalent in today's society, and it is only human nature to want someone or something to blame. The most common instigator for this worldwide issue is believed to be the fast food industry. Although it is easy to point fingers at this supposed culprit, the consumers of this industry have also played a big role in creating this problem. It is a proven fact that the majority of North Americans are sedentary; over one half of American adults do not meet the recommended levels of moderate and physical activities, and one-quarter do not engage in leisure time physical activities (Rosenheck, 2008). Therefore, is it correct to blame the fast food industry for our ever growing rate of obesity? Or is it consumer responsibility that has made this issue flourish?

Obesity

Obesity results from an indulgence in calorie intake and consumption. It is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a disease by which a surplus of body fat has compiled to the point where the health of the individual may be negatively affected. Obesity is a broad

health issue which can be a result of socio-economic factors, family lifestyles, or eating disorders. It is associated with an increased risk of several serious illnesses such as heart disease, type-2 diabetes, cardiac arrest, liver disease, and gallbladder disease. Obesity related diseases have rapidly expanded over the years in America since the mid-1970s. The number of fast food restaurants has also increased. The causes of obesity can be classified from two angles: economic and non-economic. Talking from the non-economic viewpoint (Friedman, 2000) , states, “Obesity results from the lack of discipline on the consumer’s part”. While from the economic perspective he states, “There are three correlating factors that contribute to the rising trend in obesity, which are: socio-economic factors, geographical factors, and individual attitude or perception on eating”. As of 2010, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) proclaimed that 69.2% of Americans were overweight or obese. There are more obese people in North America than on any other continent. The price of food in the United States is the most affordable in the world as a share of income (Perry, 2011). Knowing this fact makes their staggering rate of obesity even more puzzling. If it is cheaper in the U.S. than anywhere else in the world to buy fresh foods and eat healthy, why does it have the most obese population on the planet? It must be due to the consumer’s choice. Although the fast food industry is influential on society, it is up to the consumer to make the right decisions when it comes to their health.

Fast Food Restaurants

The fast food industry today is a continuously growing business. Fast food is defined as a general term that is used for a limited menu of foods that lend themselves to production-line

techniques; suppliers specialize in products such as hamburgers, sandwiches, pizzas, or chicken products (Bender, 1995). Fast food critics have affirmed that frequent visitors of fast food restaurants are less active and lethargic while the individuals that eat homemade meals are livelier and more proactive. They have also indentified several reasons why fast food is less healthy than any other sort of restaurant food. They consist of: capital, time, costs, and signature dishes (Spurlock, 2004). While the signature dishes haul in the most customers, many fast food restaurants have been starting to put more healthy choices on the menu. They are doing this for a better reputation amongst the general public as well as for their own profitable reasons. Spokespeople for the fast food industry in America feel that they should not be blamed for the growing rate of obesity. According to Professor Kelly Brownell of Yale University,

“There are no good or bad foods, just good or bad diets. The industry has defended itself by placing the burden of healthy eating on the consumer, who freely chooses to consume their product outside of what nutritional recommendations allow”. (2010)

A recent review of literature on the relationship between fast food restaurants and obesity reported that there have been no findings from observational studies that can prove a connection between fast food consumption and obesity or weight gain (Rosenheck, 2008). Fast food is known to be unhealthy, yet people continue to purchase and consume it. Economic studies have placed a great emphasis on the increase of caloric intake as the leading source of obesity. This helps show that obesity is due to the consumer’s choices for eating. The choices they make when ordering at a fast food restaurant may not improve their health; but neither will the unhealthy foods they purchase at a grocery store. If obesity is due to increased caloric intake, then it has to be consumer responsibility that is making the rate continually grow. Only they can choose what they consume.

Consumer Responsibility

Consumers have the most critical role for forming a solution to the obesity epidemic. This is due to the fact that they are the ones making their own choices about what they eat and their lifestyle. Four motivators identified that affect the decisions of consumers are: taste, quality, convenience, and price (Verduin, Agarwal, & Waltman, 2005). Although the consumers imply that eating healthy is the most important factor for them, surveys as well as sales have shown that they are more concerned about taste, availability, and price. However, they all know that living a healthy lifestyle is the key to having a health risk free life, aside from genetically inherited issues. What consumers are not aware of though, is how much fat the body needs and how much it burns. Metabolism is also an unclear subject. To help the obesity issue, there needs to be sufficient and accurate information on these topics distributed to consumers from a reliable source. Businesses should reach out to them and help in stressing the need for a healthy diet at all times. Consumers need to know that there is a difference between being full from eating fast food and consuming food that will be advantageous to their health and bodies. Awareness of the obesity issue is needed for the general public if they want it solved. When the consumers realize how big of a crisis obesity is, the fast food industry will have to adjust to their demands. If fast food companies are interested in keeping their clientele, they will be marketing more nutritious options to their consumers. In the coming years, it would be great to see a healthy twist on some signature meals in restaurants such as McDonald's, Burger King, and Wendy's. If healthy options are the only options, it would take the blame of obesity away from the fast food industry, as well as force consumers to make healthy choices.

Conclusion

Eliminating obesity from society would not happen overnight, but if everyone in the fast food industry, medical profession, and school board positions, came together in unison, they could gradually put an end to obesity. Although the fast food industry certainly does not help the sky high obesity rates worldwide, it is not the major reason for the issue. Ultimately, consumers choose to purchase fast food and consume it all by themselves. The fast food industry does indeed have an influence over the decisions of consumers when choosing to eat their meals, but it is of the consumers own free will that they choose to eat the products of these companies. In conclusion, while the fast food industry should take partial blame for the obesity epidemic, it is decisively the consumers own responsibility that should be blamed first and foremost.

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