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Converging Forces

Too Many Tasty Foods, No Time for Exercise



America faces a health crisis unlike any in our history. The crisis does not center on a particular disease but is a product of our behavior. Americans are taking advantage of the inexpensive, abundant, and tasty foods available to them and the many technological gadgets that make life less labor intensive. The result is Americans are eating more and moving less nowadays than in past years.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 3 in 10 Americans are obese and nearly two-thirds are overweight. Obesity rates have increased over time: from 17 percent in the 1960s, to 23 percent in the 1990s, to 31 percent now. More alarming, our children appear to be gaining weight at a faster rate. Along with the increase in obesity comes an increase in related health problems (diabetes, heart attacks, and strokes) and medical costs.

The dangerous situation our Nation now confronts has been emerging for more than a century. It is the result of massive societal changes, remarkable advances in technology, and the steady growth of our national economy. The challenge we policymakers now face is how to reverse the weight gain crisis while, at the same time, not infringing on individual freedom of choice of food intake and physical activities.

The U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services recognize the dilemma and recently cosponsored the National Obesity Prevention Conference, bringing together a wide range of disciplines to put the obesity prevention issue on a sound scientific basis. Food choices, nutrition and diet, physical exercise, human behavior, new food products, socioeconomic factors, education, and policy prescriptions were all covered. The conference was a unique opportunity to begin developing effective solutions to challenges presented by the obesity crisis – solutions that promise not only to improve, but to actually save thousands of lives each year through effective prevention measures.

One consensus that emerged from the conference: No magic or simple solution exists. Progress will be slow but it will come, one small step at a time. The scientific community will contribute with new advances, information, and insights on the complex relationship among food, eating behavior, nutrition, and health. The food industry will develop new foods that are tasty and healthy. Economists will help us better understand the costs associated with poor food choices. Physical exercise professionals will develop activities that people can fit into their busy lifestyles. Federal and local governments will partner and provide resources. Nevertheless, the most important factor of all is the determination of the American people to overcome the converging forces of poor diets and lack of exercise.

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