

Junk food

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Junk food is a pejorative term for cheap food containing high levels of calories from sugar or fat with little fiber, protein, vitamins or minerals.^{[1][2][3]} Junk food can also refer to high protein food like meat prepared with saturated fat - which some believe may be unhealthy, although some studies have shown no correlation between saturated fat and cardiovascular diseases;^[4] many hamburger outlets, fried chicken outlets and the like supply food considered as junk food.^[5]

Despite being labeled as "junk", such foods usually do not pose any immediate health concerns and are generally safe when integrated into a well balanced diet.^[6] However, concerns about the negative health effects resulting from the consumption of a "junk food"-heavy diet, especially obesity, have resulted in public health awareness campaigns, and restrictions on advertising and sale in several countries.^{[7][8][9]}

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Origin of the term

The term *junk food* dates back at least to the early 1950s,^[10] although it has been reported that it was coined in 1972 by Michael F. Jacobson of the Center for Science in the Public Interest.^[3] In 1952, it appeared in a headline in the Lima, Ohio, *News*, "Candy, Cake, 'Junk Foods' Cause Serious



A poster at Camp Pendleton's 21-Area Health Promotion Center describes the effects of junk food that many Marines and sailors consume.

Malnutrition", for a reprint of a 1948 article from the Ogden, Utah, *Standard-Examiner*, originally headlined, "Dr. Brady's Health Column: More Junk Than Food". In it, Dr. Brady writes, "What Mrs. H calls 'junk' I call cheat food. That is anything made principally of (1) white flour and or (2) refined white sugar or syrup. For example, white bread, crackers, cake, candy, ice cream soda, chocolate malted, sundaes, sweetened carbonated beverages."^[11] The term *cheat food* can be traced back in newspaper mentions to at least 1916.^[12]

Definitions

Andrew F. Smith, in his book, *Encyclopedia of Junk Food and Fast Food* defines junk food as "those commercial products, including candy, bakery goods, ice cream, salty snacks, and soft drinks, which have little or no nutritional value but do have plenty of calories, salt, and fats. While not all fast foods are junk foods, most are. Fast foods are ready-to-eat foods served promptly after ordering. Some fast foods are high in calories and low in nutritional value, while other fast foods, such as salads, may be low in calories and high in nutritional value."^[13]

Junk foods have empty calories as the energetic content is not complemented with proteins and lipids required for nutritious alimentation. François Magendie showed by experiment in 1816 that dogs died when fed only sugar.^[14] It has been noted that the metabolic cost of processing empty calories drains a body of resources and is debilitating.

Foods commonly considered junk foods include salted snack foods, gum, candy, sweet desserts, fried fast food, and sugary carbonated beverages.^[15] Many foods such as hamburgers, pizza, and tacos can be considered either healthy or junk food depending on their ingredients and preparation methods.^[16] The more highly processed items usually fall under the junk food category,^[17] including breakfast cereals that are mostly sugar or high-fructose corn syrup and white flour or milled corn.^[18]

Especially in the case of ethnic foods, a classification as "junk food" could be perceived as rather offensive, given that such foods may have been prepared and consumed for centuries and may contain healthy ingredients. In the book, *Panic Nation: Unpicking the Myths We're Told About Food and Health*, a complementary point is argued: food is food, and if there is no nutritional value, then it isn't a food of any type, "junk" or otherwise.^[19] Co-editor Vincent Marks explains, "To label a food as 'junk' is just another way of saying, 'I disapprove of it.' There are bad diets - that is, bad mixtures and quantities of food - but there are no 'bad foods' except those that have become bad through contamination or deterioration."^[20]

Popularity and appeal

Junk food in its various forms is extremely popular, and an integral part of modern popular culture. In the US, annual fast food sales are in the area of \$160 billion,^[21] compared to supermarket sales of \$620 billion^[22] (a figure which also includes junk food^[22] in the form of convenience foods, snack foods, and candy). In 1976, "Junk Food Junkie", the tale of a junk food addict who pretends to follow a healthy diet by day, while at night he clandestinely gorges on Hostess Twinkies and Fritos corn chips, McDonalds

and KFC, became a Top 10 pop hit in the US.^[23] Thirty-six years later, *Time* placed the Twinkie at #1 in its "Top 10 Iconic Junk Foods" special feature: "Not only...a mainstay on our supermarket shelves and in our bellies, they've been a staple in our popular culture and, above all, in our hearts. Often criticized for its lack of any nutritional value whatsoever, the Twinkie has managed to persevere as a cultural and gastronomical icon."^[24]

America also celebrates an annual National Junk Food Day on July 21. Origins are unclear; it is one of around 175 US food and drink days, most created by "people who want to sell more food", at times aided by elected officials at the request of a trade association or commodity group.^[25] "In honor of the day," *Time* in 2014 published, "5 Crazy Junk Food Combinations". Headlines from other national and local media coverage include: "Celebrate National Junk Food Day With... Beer-Flavored Oreos?" (MTV);^[26] "National Junk Food Day: Pick your favorite unhealthy treats in this poll" (Baltimore);^[27] "Celebrities' favorite junk food" (Los Angeles);^[28] "A Nutritionist's Guide to National Junk Food Day" with "Rules for Splurging" (*Huffington Post*);^[29] and "It's National Junk Food Day: Got snacks?" (Kansas City).^[30]

That the poor eat more junk food overall than the more affluent is quite well-established, but the reasons for this are not clear.^[31] Few studies have focused on variations in food perception according to socio-economic status (SES); some studies that have differentiated based on SES suggest that the economically challenged don't perceive healthy food much differently than any other segment of the population.^[32] Recent research into scarcity, combining behavioral science and economics, suggests that, faced with extreme economic uncertainty, where even the next meal may not be a sure thing, judgment is impaired and the drive is to the instant gratification of junk food, rather than to making the necessary investment in the longer-term benefits of a healthier diet.^{[33][34]}

Health effects

When junk food is consumed very often, the excess fat, carbohydrates, and processed sugar found in junk food contributes to an increased risk of obesity, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, weight gain, and many other chronic health conditions.^[35] Also consumers tend to eat too much at one sitting and consumers who have satisfied their appetite with junk food are less likely to eat healthy foods like fruit, vegetables or dairy products.^[36] Studies reveal that as early as the age of 30, arteries could begin clogging and lay the groundwork for future heart attacks.^[37]

Testing on rats has indicated negative effects of junk food that may manifest likewise in people. A Scripps Research Institute study in 2008 suggested that junk food consumption alters brain activity in a manner similar to addictive drugs like cocaine and heroin. After many weeks with unlimited access to junk food, the pleasure centers of rat brains became desensitized, requiring more food for pleasure; after the junk food was taken away and replaced with a healthy diet, the rats starved for two weeks instead of eating nutritious fare.^{[38][39]} A 2007 study in the *British Journal of Nutrition* found that female rats who eat junk food during pregnancy increased the likelihood of unhealthy eating habits in their offspring.^[40]

Anti-junk food measures

A number of countries have adopted, or are considering, various forms of legislated action to curb junk food consumption. In 2014, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to health, Anand Grover, released his report, "Unhealthy foods, non-communicable diseases and the right to health", and called for governments to "take measures, such as developing food and nutrition guidelines for healthy diets, regulating marketing and advertising of junk food, adopting consumer-friendly labelling of food products, and establishing accountability mechanisms for violations of the right to health."^[41]

An early, high-profile and controversial attempt to identify and curb junk food in the American diet was launched by the so-called McGovern Committee, formally, the United States Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs, between 1968 and 1977, chaired by Senator George McGovern. Initially formed to investigate malnutrition and hunger in the US, the committee's scope progressively expanded to include environmental conditions that affected eating habits, like urban decay,^[42] then focused on the diet and nutritional habits of the American public. It criticized the use of salt, sugar and fat in processed foods, noted problems with overeating and the high percentage of ads for junk food on TV, and stated that bad eating habits could be as deadly as smoking. The findings were heavily criticized and rebutted from many directions, including the food industry, the American Medical Association, and within the committee itself. In 1977, the committee issued public guidelines under the title, *Dietary Goals for the United States*, which became the predecessor to *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, published every five years beginning in 1980 by the US Department of Health and Human Services.^{[43][44]}

Taxation

In an attempt to reduce junk food consumption through price control, forms of Pigovian taxation have been implemented. Targeting saturated fat consumption, Denmark introduced the world's first fat-food tax in October, 2011, by imposing a surcharge on all foods, including those made from natural ingredients, that contain more than 2.3 percent saturated fat, an unpopular measure that lasted a little over a year.^{[45][46][47]} Hungary has also imposed a tax on packaged foods that contain unhealthy concentrations, such as beverages containing more than 20 mg of caffeine per 100 ml.^[48] Norway taxes refined sugar, and Mexico has various excises on unhealthy food.^[49] On April 1, 2015, the first fat tax in the US, the Navajo Nation's Healthy Diné Nation Act of 2014, mandating a 2% junk food tax, came into effect, covering the 27,000 sq. mi. of Navajo reservation; the Act targeted problems with obesity and diabetes among the Navajo population.^[50]

Advertising restriction

Junk food that is targeted at children is a contentious issue. In "The Impact of Advertising on Childhood Obesity", the American Psychological Association reports: "Research has found strong associations between increases in advertising for non-nutritious foods and rates of childhood obesity."^[51] In the UK, efforts to increasingly limit or eliminate advertising of foods high in sugar, salt or fat at any time when children may be viewing are ongoing.^[52]

Controversy over junk food promotions during Australian cricket matches was reported in the news media in early 2015. A Wollongong University study showed that junk food sponsors were mentioned over 1,000 times in a single match broadcast, which included ads and branding worn on players' uniforms and on the scoreboard and pitch. A coalition of Australian obesity, cancer and diabetes organizations called on Cricket Australia, the sport's governing body, to "phase out sponsorships with unhealthy brands", emphasizing that cricket is a "healthy, family-oriented sport" with children in the audience. many countries have restricted advertising of junk food.^[53]

Behavior problems

In a study by the European Journal of Clinical Nutrition, the frequency of consumption of 57 foods/drinks of 4000 children at the age of four and a half were collected by maternal report. At age seven the 4000 children were given the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). The test was divided into 5 sections: Hyperactivity, peer problems, emotional symptoms and pro-social behavior. A one standard deviation increase in junk food was then linked to excessive hyperactivity in 33% of the 4000 children. In conclusion, children with excess junk food at four and a half are more likely to be in the top third of the hyperactivity sub-scale; however, there is not enough correlation between junk food and the other sub-scales such as emotional symptoms and peer problems.^[54]

See also

- Obesity
- Comfort food
- Glutamic acid (flavor), common flavoring compounds and their synthetic versions, which may be added to some processed foods, to boost their savoriness
- Health food, foods that tend to be nutrient rich, and may be eaten for their potential benefits to health
- List of food additives
- Nutrient profiling

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External links

- International Junk and Snack Food Review (<http://snackertainment.com>)
- Junk Food, Marketing, and Behavior (http://wik.ed.uiuc.edu/index.php/Junk_Food,_Marketing,_and_Behavior)
- The 10 Worst Foods of 2010 (http://www.dailyspark.com/blog.asp?post=the_10_worst_foods_of_2010)
- Junk food facts and its effects (<http://www.dietpolicy.com/diets-articles/junk-food-facts.htm>)

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