

Op-Ed Published in:
San Francisco Chronicle
Friday, July 9, 2010

“The best 'big gun' against obesity”

By:

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One of the nation's foremost experts on type 2 diabetes, Thomas Buchanan, said in the June issue of the journal *Obesity* that our obesity crisis has become so severe that the United States must "bring on the big guns" by widely promoting minimally invasive weight loss surgery.

Given the number of people struggling with overweight and well on the road to diabetes, the total cost and human impact of the tens of millions of surgical procedures that would be required to combat obesity in this way boggles the mind. Plus, the long-term weight-reduction effectiveness of less invasive surgical procedures is unknown, as are rates of complications from "hardwiring" weight loss by physically manipulating a person's GI tract.

We agree that the crisis is urgent, with 1 in 3 children born today expected to develop type 2 diabetes in their lifetimes. We also agree that the two major "weapons" now deployed in the fight - moderate lifestyle interventions designed to reduce weight, and drug therapies to slow the progression of diabetes - are just not up to the challenge of reducing the frequency and severity of the disease. For most patients, they only delay the onset of symptoms by a few years.

Promising options

But instead of placing hope primarily in surgical interventions to lose weight, let's use different "big guns" earlier in life to help prevent overweight and diabetes in the first place. Recent science points to several promising options, many of which impose only modest costs on society and will deliver benefits beyond lowering the risk of diabetes. With effort, we can farm and eat our way around at least some of the problem.

Given that almost everyone is well aware of the basic nutritional imperatives to control weight and lower the risk of diabetes, why are so many people struggling to change dietary patterns sufficient to promote good health?

First, food habits and taste preferences, once formed, are hard to break. It's time to make forming good food habits in children a national priority. Let's focus on cultivating Nutritional Intelligence - the ability to recognize and enjoy healthy amounts of good food.

Poor-quality, fast and highly processed foods are the most readily available, convenient and affordable source of calories for many people. These foods are manufactured and advertised by companies that have gotten very good at producing and promoting food products that taste good and trigger pleasing sensations and deliver a short-term boost in energy levels. Incidentally, these well-documented physiological responses to processed and fast foods are brought about via mechanisms not unlike those leading to drug addiction.

Second, the ubiquitous presence in certain foods of chemicals that can promote obesity is another major reason so many people struggle to change diets in a way sufficient to promote good health.

Chemical exposure

Everyone is exposed to dozens of such chemicals every day through their diet. Many are present in food as a result of how the industry preserves and packages food products. Alarming new data link a pregnant woman's exposure to organophosphate insecticides to increased risk of obesity and diabetes as her child grows up. Residues of about a dozen organophosphate insecticides are an unavoidable part of the daily American diet for everyone consuming conventionally grown food. This is why many health professionals, food companies and consumers are turning to organic food and farming as a commonsense way to take one set of risk factors off the table.

Stronger and more effective steps are clearly needed to combat obesity and diabetes. Nutritional Intelligence is the "big gun" we need. Let's avoid creating undue hope in the "big gun" of surgical procedures that deliver questionable long-term improvements in quality of life at very high cost.

Instead, as a nation, we need to pursue an aggressive, systematic campaign designed to clean up our food, promote wise food and dietary choices, and invest in the prevention of disease, especially during the early stages of life when the foundation for healthy development and disease prevention is laid, or disrupted, by what we eat.

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