



Taking Control of Eating Habits

Letter to Reader

The purpose of researching the impact of packaged and processed foods is to bring awareness. Issues like obesity and diabetes are becoming more apparent because of the foods being consumed. While all research is ethical and truthful, some studies may include bias. Studies I looked at took place in different areas of the country and included different people which can teeter results. To attempt to keep bias low, I chose research done by people with PhD's who have a background in obesity and diabetes.

I asked myself, what is so bad about packaged and processed foods? What is the difference between packaged and processed foods? Why do we see these foods so often? How are they affecting the youth in America? All these questions led me to certain research and findings. Altogether, packaged and processed foods are causing liver failure, diabetes, obesity, shortening lifespans, and more. These issues and solutions will be furthered discussed.

Introduction

Sugary, oily, fatty, salty – all words used to describe packaged and processed foods. The list of cons continues, yet these types of foods are still promoted and fed to the youth of America. The sugary flavor that comes from unhealthy food processing makes these treats extremely craveable. Kids reach for a quick fix for their growling stomachs and are attracted to the bright colors illustrated on packages. It is much easier to pour a bowl of Captain Crunch rather than make an organic bowl of chicken and broccoli. While artificial sweeteners are cheap, tempting, and convenient, the long-term effects are not.



These enticing foods are in schools, at the park, in the grocery store and because of this, issues like obesity and diabetes rise in popularity. Looking at various childhood factors will lead to a better understanding of what is wrong with feeding young kids junk food and how America can alleviate this growing problem. This research all points back to the same question: how are packaged and processed foods impacting the youth in America and how can it be stopped?

Where it starts: Childhood and Marketing

The most gullible consumers are children. A catchy slogan, celebrity face, and bright color is just enough to make a kid beg in the grocery store; this cycle continues making sugary snacks a regular. When this pattern starts at an early age, parents are to blame, not kids. Often, parents give gummy packets as a bribe to their kids, knowing it would keep their mouths shut, but this bad habit trails into adolescents then adulthood. Once children are old enough to decide their own midday snack, they lean towards oily potato chips or sugary brownies because it is what they know.

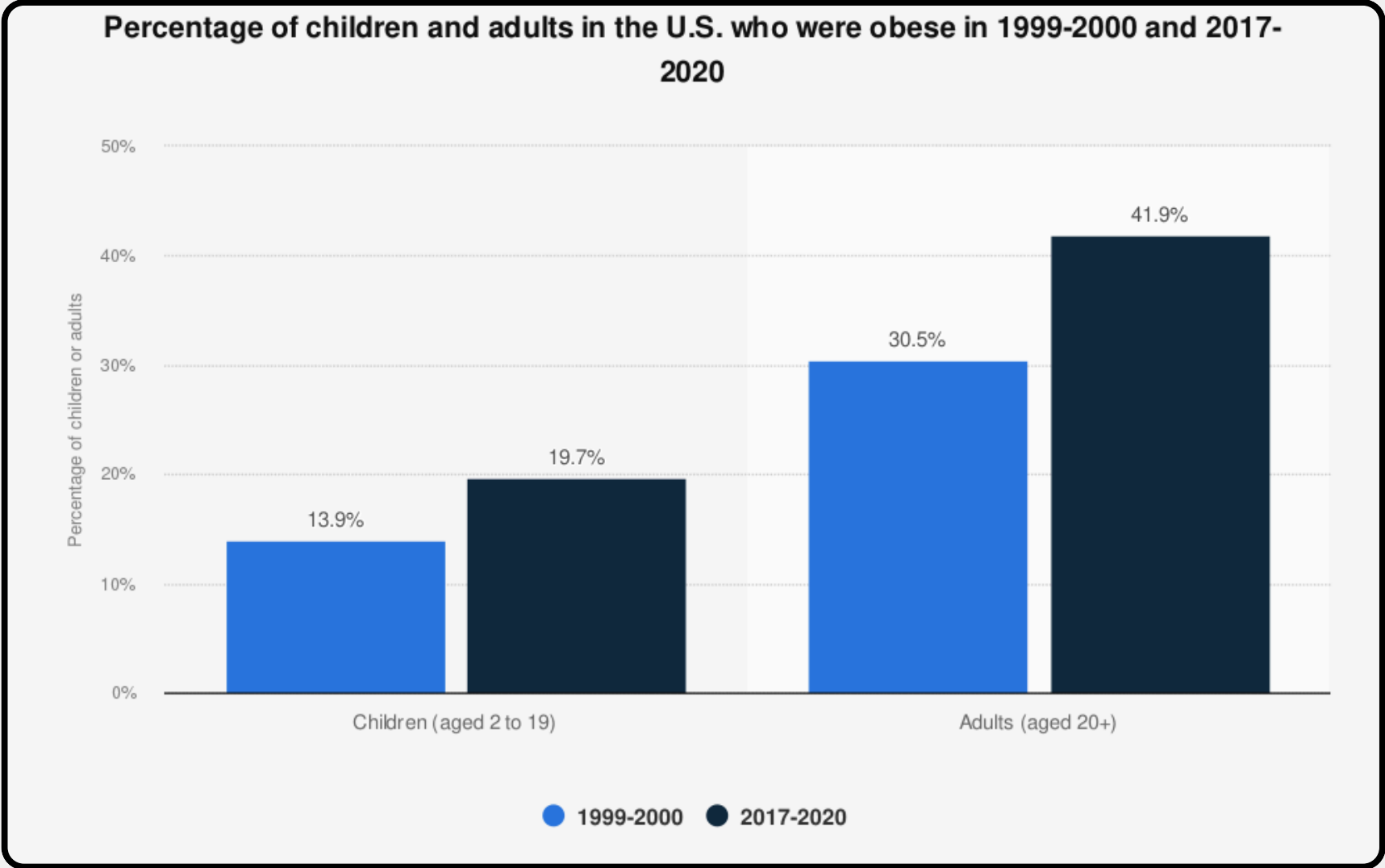
Take vending machines for example, there is usually a lengthy line of students waiting for packaged foods that are not filling. In a quantitative research paper, obesity researcher, Taryn Orava, points out the impact of supplying poor foods in vending machines: “the stocking of energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods within vending machines may lead to increased consumption of such foods and defer consumption of nutrient-rich fruits and vegetables,” and when walking by these machines, it is easy to tell that there are only processed foods offered (Orava). Then comes lunch time – kids who bring their lunch pull out Lunchables and peanut butter jelly sandwiches and kids who go through the lunch line usually choose French fries and fried chicken.



There are two things these lunches have in common: being convenient and being cheap. Looking at the nutrition label of Lunchables' “Turkey and American Cracker Stackers” it is obvious there is a high amount of saturated fat (7 g) and sodium (660 mg) (see image 1). According to a study done by BMC Public Health in January of 2024, ideally, less than 2000 mg of sodium should be consumed per day but because sodium intake is already at such a high rate, Americans should strive for 2300 mg of sodium per day (Liu, Donghao, et al). Americans know consuming too much salt is bad for human health yet foods with excessive amounts of sodium are still extremely popular. This is only one small meal that may be eaten, think of every other meal and snack that is consumed throughout the day; these numbers add up.

How this impacts adulthood?

While these numbers add up, issues like diabetes, obesity, and liver failure are more apparent than before in America; this is due to the high intake of sugar and salt. These types of foods are so tempting, but the more packaged and processed foods that one person consumes, the less room there is for nutritious, fresh foods. The number of children and adults with obesity is growing. Problems seen in adulthood are also seeping into childhood (image 2). In many cases, children who are overweight at five years old (around 32%) are much more likely to become obese; this follows into adulthood meaning lifespans are shortening (Larery). These issues cause shorter lifespans and are bothersome to deal with.



The doctor’s appointments, strict diets, and living in discomfort all come with these types of health issues. For people who suffer from obesity, day-to-day tasks are intimidating and tend to be much more tiring because body mass indexes are higher, and more weight is being carried (Slagter). As mentioned in the beginning, other health issues include liver failure and cardiovascular issues. These issues can cause strokes and heart attacks which can lead to early deaths. With all these concerns in mind, watching what Americans eat can save lives.

Solutions

1. One step that can be taken towards healthier eating habits is educating. Schools should have mandatory classes that inform students on nutrients and the impact of healthy vs. unhealthy eating. In a study done by Daniela Martini and Davide Menozzi, it is proved that appealing labels and colors make people want to buy certain products. Therefore, there should be policies made when it comes to educating about food and labeling products. If organic foods were advertised with the same design as packaged and processed foods, they would seem much more attractive to children. Associating well-known names or catchy slogans with healthy foods will make kids reach for them more often.



2. Like the point above, teaching children how to easily read a nutrition label and what normal serving sizes consist of can make healthier foods seem less daunting and allow children to understand what they are ingesting.

3. One of the bigger factors when it comes to grocery shopping includes pricing. Foods that have not been processed over and over tend to be much more expensive than a box of Lucky Charms. For example, in Kroger, 10.5 ounces of Lucky Charms cost \$4.29 while 11 ounces of KIND healthy granola costs \$6.29. When looking at unit prices, Lucky Charms are 41 cents per ounce while KIND healthy granola is 57 cents per ounce. While a few cents may not seem significant, it is something that cannot be overlooked.

Solution Summary and Organizations

Partly eliminating the option of processed foods could help but to completely veto processed foods is unrealistic; instead, advocating for a change in certain states, or even all throughout the country, could bring prices down. An example of this is a program called FVRx. This organization improves fruit and vegetable intake by educating communities on nutrition and offering more realistic prices. In a published nutrition journal, Nicholas Slagel comments on how beneficial this specific organization is: “FVRx participants significantly increased healthful food purchasing practices and the ability to afford more bills,” showing how much of a difference this program is making. There are other programs such as FVRx that are striving to make a change, so it is important to investigate these types of groups to spread the word. Not all packaged foods are processed and vice versa; food processing consists of altering foods using equipment while packaged foods are simply contained in bags or boxes. Packaged and processed foods relate because most processed foods are packaged. Although processed foods were originally meant to eliminate bacteria, the food industry has gone too far making these foods harmful. There are several options to make a change, but taking the first step can be hard. Educating children and parents, changing marketing strategies, and connecting with programs are all a good start.



Conclusion

The effects of packaged foods continue to grow because these tempting foods are cheap and convenient. Reaching for these types of snacks starts at an early age and is illustrated going into adulthood. This is a concern that needs to be dialed way back. To ease this concern, teaching good eating habits at an early age, switching what is advertised in stores, and discovering organizations involved with healthier eating are alternatives. As individuals, it is important to be aware of what foods are being consumed and how they affect health physically and mentally. Hopefully, with this issue in mind, reaching for organic chicken is more tempting than a bowl of Captain Crunch.

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