

Can we reformulate foods to eat our way out of obesity?



Straight Talk from the Sugar Association

Obesity is a serious problem in the US. In an effort to solve this problem some food and nutrition regulatory agencies and some in the academic community are encouraging food manufacturers to reformulate foods to reduce so-called unhealthy ingredients. The question is will reformulating foods to make so-called healthier versions result in a truly healthier food supply and allow us to eat our way out of obesity? Or will this effort merely be a distraction from the important message to eat less and move more.

The Low-Fat Intervention

Were any lessons learned from the low-fat reformulation of foods in the 1990s? Did we see improved health outcomes? The answer has to be “no.” Obesity and overweight increased dramatically over the same time period and overweight is just as important a contributor to negative health. So it’s hard to believe there were significant health gains from the low-fat approach.

What are some of the reasons now cited for the failed low-fat intervention?

- There was so much emphasis on limiting fat in foods that many consumers ignored the fundamental importance of total calorie intake. The Food and Drug Administration is now considering removing the calories from fat category on the Nutrition Facts Panel.
- Foods need ingredients to provide bulk, texture and flavor. When foods were reformulated to reduce fat content manufacturers often increased carbohydrates or fillers to provide the necessary bulk and texture. The result was that many food products did not have significantly fewer calories and eating just a little more of some of these foods undid the potential calorie savings.
- Some consumers believed that fat-free meant

“I can eat more or as much as I want.” This attitude was named the “Snackwell Phenomenon,” the psychological permission to eat more of a low-fat or no-fat product.

What about Sugar-Free and Less Sugar products?

The June 2003 Tufts University Health & Nutrition Newsletter contained an article titled *Sugar-Free Shortcomings*. The article pointed out that many sugar-free products have similar carbohydrate content and calories as the regular sugared versions. Since then, some media professionals, academic institutions and nutrition experts have begun to warn consumers that less sugar does not necessarily mean fewer calories.

Recently the Associated Press asked five nutrition scientists to evaluate newly introduced “reduced sugar” kids cereals. The scientists found that the reduced sugar versions of popular kid’s cereals provided no reduction in calories or improved nutritional content over the regular sugared versions. The reason there were not significant changes in calories or nutritional value in these cereals was simply because the replacement ingredients used to provide the necessary bulk and texture of the cereals had no nutritional or caloric advantage over sugar.

Are artificial sweeteners helpful?

According to the American Dietetic Association (ADA) 2004 position paper on the use of nutritive and nonnutritive sweeteners, “Nonnutritive sweeteners added to the diet have been shown to promote a modest loss of weight.” Yet the undeniable is also stated, “The prevalence of obesity has increased substantially at the same time as the consumption of nonnutritive sweeteners has increased.” Although the ADA position is that

Make an informed choice.

Choose pure natural sugar – 15 calories per teaspoon.

Reformulating Foods

nonnutritive sweeteners can be helpful in controlling energy intake, the statement also includes the following sound advice, “Individuals who wish to lose weight may choose to use nonnutritive sweeteners but should do so within the context of a sensible weight management program including a balance diet and exercise.” *JADA Feb 2004 104: 2, p. 256-275.*

Are reformulated foods truly better for you?

Many reformulated foods are created under the pretext of lowering ingredients associated with negative health impacts. But are these reformulated foods really better for you? One of the best examples that good intentions can create unintended consequences was the effort to replace butter with margarine containing hydrogenated oils, which led to increased intakes of trans fats. Other examples are:

- Non-dairy products are primarily starch solids that lack the calcium and other minerals, such as Vitamin D, of dairy products;
- Less sugar products often contain higher fat content with little, if any, calorie reduction;
- Most filler and bulking agents are less expensive carbohydrates possessing 4 calories per gram and do not provide any nutritional advantage over sugar or other ingredients they replace;
- “Less Sugar” juices are watered-down versions of the original that are artificially sweetened;
- Many egg replacers are primarily protein and micronutrient deficient oils; and
- Fruit and juice products sweetened with concentrated fruit juices may sound healthier but have no nutritional or caloric advantage over other nutritive sweeteners.

Over the past several decades, foods once considered staples of the American diet such as eggs, milk, and butter have come under attack.

Now rice, potatoes, and sugars are being labeled as potential sources of health problems. We believe that to encourage the development of new foods or food ingredients to replace proven foods and ingredients carries the risk of not improving long-term health. We offer trans-fat and decreased calcium intake as examples. The continued move away from our natural food sources may have long term repercussions on metabolism, satiety and taste preferences. The evidence is overwhelming that simply restricting one food item, ingredient or macronutrient does not work.

It is also a fact that many so called “healthy foods” can lead to weight gain simply because they are being consumed in portions that are in excess of what individuals need to maintain a healthy weight. A nation wide educational effort by all stakeholders to assist the American public in understanding proper portion size whether they are eating fruits, vegetables, dairy, grain, fast food or dessert would be a better use of current resources than another cycle of food development.

We assert that America’s current dietary problems including overweight and obesity are not the result of a lack of healthy low-calorie foods but instead are the results of lack of understanding about nutrition, ever changing nutrition advice and confusion about our increasingly complex food supply leading to misguided individual choice, and frankly, consuming too much from an abundant supply of food.

Food For Thought: Will we be able to eat our way out of obesity?

Should we continue to try to reformulate our food supply hoping for improved health outcomes or should we promote the importance of satisfying our appetites with small portions of the real thing? Can we reformulate foods to eat our way out of obesity, or are we simply prolonging the problem.