

The Women's Health Research Program

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Fat nation: why so many Australians are obese and how to fix it



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In 1980 just 10% of Australian adults were obese; by 2012 this figure had risen to 25%, among the highest in the world. The food industry lobby and their friends in government would have us believe this comes down to reduced personal responsibility for what we eat and how much we move.

We might, then, expect to find evidence that people are becoming less responsible. But statistics show the opposite: we are much more likely to drive more safely, drive sober and not smoke for example.

Yet when it comes to food, something is different. Our changing food environment has undermined our capacity to be responsible in the first place.

Commercialisation of food

Once, not so long ago, food was scarce. As humans we were programmed to over-consume calories when food was plentiful and to store it as fat for when it was not.

So we have to acknowledge that in our hunter-gatherer past, consuming as

much food as possible was personally responsible – those who didn't would likely perish. And this has been hard-wired into our DNA.

Today, our environment is fundamentally different – cheap, energy-dense foods are abundant. In this light, obesity is just the superficial and normal human response to an increasingly “obesogenic” food environment. One with deeply-rooted commercial and political drivers.

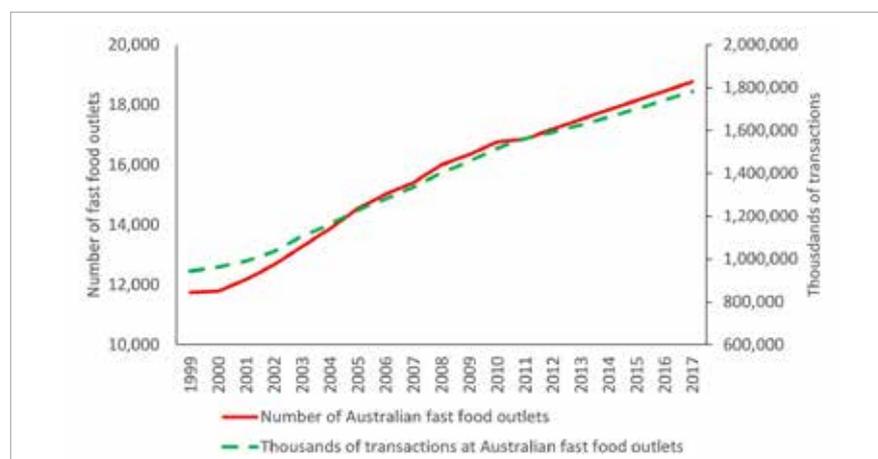
There is nothing more obesogenic than our commercial food supply. Today, industrial agriculture produces raw food ingredients at very low cost per calorie output. With globalisation, ingredients can be sourced from wherever in the world production costs are lowest (such as Malaysian palm oil) or heavily subsidised (American sugar).

Food science has been harnessed by companies to produce highly palatable and durable foods rich in sugar, salt and fat. Serving sizes have grown remarkably – good for our wallets, perhaps, but not so good for our waistlines.

On the retail end, supermarkets have proliferated as the purveyors of processed foods, driving down prices through their buying power and using data-driven product promotion.

We also have less time for sourcing, preparing and eating food. And the food industry has responded with “ready-to-heat” meals, “ready-to-eat” snack foods and “fast-food” restaurants (see graph).

The McDonaldisation of our society stems not only from our biological drive to crave energy dense food, but from our need to compress the time in which we source and consume it.



Information asymmetry

The concept of information symmetry states that markets work best when both sellers and buyers have full information about the costs and benefits of their buying and selling behaviours. And when it comes to Australian processed food labels, information is stacked heavily in favour of the seller.

Food companies collect reams of information about consumers (just think of supermarket loyalty cards), allowing for targeted advertising, pricing points and product placement. Yet most Australians find existing food labels confusing. To make an “informed choice” we have to interpret not only nutrition information panels, but also an array of (sometimes misleading) health claims.

Junk food advertising is also big business in Australia: in 2009 A\$402 million and \$149 million was spent on advertising food and non-alcoholic beverages respectively. McDonald’s alone increased its advertising spend from \$6 million in 1983 to \$55 million in 2005.

Why do companies advertise? Because it drives consumer behaviour in powerful ways. Especially when it comes to children and their pester power, much to the disdain of many parents.

Coming back to information asymmetry, advertising is less about communicating information as it is about conveying symbolic and social meaning – products come to be associated with fun, sex appeal and prestige rather than information about their underlying costs and benefits in terms of health.

The end result is we’re trying to exercise personal responsibility in a food environment that’s engineered to undermine it. Food is available everywhere at any time. It is full of sugar, fat and salt – nutrients we’re hard-wired to crave. Per calorie, it has never been cheaper.

The information we have to inform our choices is heavily skewed by advertising and confusing labels. Government has done little about it. And we – as a nation – are fat.

Reducing our collective waistline

Here are some ideas – for us as citizens and for government – to turn the situation around.

1. Re-think the role of government

The conceptual cousin of the personal responsibility mantra is the “nanny-state” argument, that there is no role for government intervention that restricts the freedoms of Australian citizens. In reality, such arguments are nothing to do with regulating us as individuals. It’s just Orwellian doublespeak to oppose food industry regulation.

The true role of government is not to restrict individual freedoms, it is to enable them by creating an environment – through policy and legislation – in which we are truly free to exercise our personal responsibility.

2. Change the food environment

Without changing food environments through hard policy and legislation, it’s unlikely we will make any progress tackling obesity. Successful tobacco control efforts demonstrate that a variety of intertwining measures need to be taken.

3. Tax the junk

We need to change the economics of our food supply. A tax on sugary, salty and fatty processed foods is one way forward. Following the lead of many countries overseas we could begin with a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages – relatively simple to implement, and likely to be effective.

4. Improve food labelling

We need a food labelling system that enables personal responsibility. Let’s compare three options.

First is the food industry’s current “daily intake guide” (which it continues to push), calculated as the percentage one product serving contributes to the daily intake of an average adult of 8,700 kilojoules.

But food manufacturers are allowed to set the serving sizes, which are often unrealistic. And because the measure isn’t standardised,

it’s difficult to make any meaningful comparison between products.

Second is the proposed star system. It’s a half-way point between what industry and public health advocates want, although its future is uncertain.

Third is the traffic light system. Research indicates that nine-out-of-ten Australians support such a scheme. It was designed by health experts to promote an easy-to-understand message that encourages consumers to buy more food items with green lights and fewer items with amber and red lights.

Which one do you think will make it easier for consumers, especially less educated ones, to make an informed and personally responsible choice?

5. Ditch junk food advertising to kids

Over 75% of Australians support a ban on junk food advertising in children’s television, and nearly 20% support a total ban. We know from tobacco control that this will be a key step in curbing obesity and evidence supports this.

6. Change the political environment

Perhaps the most potent way our food system undermines personal responsibility is when the food industry lobbies against the policies that would enable it in the first place.

Government needs to ensure our regulatory institutions are not conflicted. And it’s now time to recognise that industry self-regulation doesn’t work.

Finally, we, as citizens, can become politically active. Addressing this conflict brings into play not only the important roles of public health advocacy groups like the Obesity Policy Coalition, but also citizen’s movements like the Parents Jury, to demand action.

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