Morgan Spurlock wanted to be in a movie. And he was in a movie one he made himself which he then presented to the world at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival. The subject of the movie was the fattening of Morgan himself he managed to gain 25 pounds in a month by overeating at McDonald's restaurants. The name of his documentary, "Supersize Me," should serve as a warning to the rest of us that eating too much will make us fat (which we might have heard before).

Actually, Mr. Spurlock is simply following an old Hollywood tradition gaining weight to suit a movie role. Robert DeNiro did it for "Raging Bull," as did Rene Zellweger for "Bridget Jones' Diary," and most recently, Charlize Theron for "Monster." As far as I know, none of these thespians restricted their weight-gaining efforts to any particular type of food or eating venue.

But that won't stop Mr. Spurlock (and others) from blaming McDonald's for his own foray into gluttony. This despite the fact that Americans are overindulging in virtually all venues, not just fast food outlets like McDonald's. Recent reports of food consumption and calorie intake indicate that between national surveys performed in the late 1970s and the mid-1990s, intake increased significantly across the board. Americans over 2 years of age consumed nearly 200 more calories per day in the '90s than in the '70s. And whether one looks at French fries, desserts, salty snacks, meals or Mexican food, the increases were statistically significant.

Since the '90s, the picture hasn't improved. Recently, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published the results of another survey summary this one examining energy intake between 1971 and 2000 by adults between the ages of 20 and 74. Again, total reported daily calorie intake increased for both men and women. For men, the increase was on the order of about 170 calories and for women over 300 calories.

Americans apparently tried to pay attention to the advice to limit fat intake during that period, as the percent of calories consumed from fat decreased. Unfortunately, while the percentage of calories from fat decreased, this was because the total calories consumed increased, as did the actual amount of fat! Although it is very much au courant these days to blame specific nutrients (carbohydrates are the villains du jour) for increasing Americans' girth, this is highly misleading. In fact, there are some good data suggesting that a diet lower in fat and thus necessarily higher in carbs can work perfectly well for weight loss.

Participants in the National Weight Control Registry are folks who have managed to lose at least 30 pounds, and to keep the weight off for at least one year. In fact, on average they have lost over 60 pounds and maintained the weight loss for over 3 years. These successful weight losers report that the composition of their low calorie diets is typically only about 24% fat, which doesn't support the idea that a successful weight loss diet must be low in carbohydrate.
In another CDC article, there was a (very) small bit of good news. This article documents trends in the prevalence of lack of leisure-time physical activity between 1988 and 2002. The summary covered data from 35 states and the District of Columbia and found that in 1989, about 32% of adults surveyed reported no leisure-time physical activity, while by 2002 that proportion had decreased to 25%. This is good news, because it suggests that maybe Americans are beginning to pay attention to advice from a variety of health experts who urge us all to be physically active. Of course, the fact that leisure time inactivity has decreased doesn't have to mean that Americans are active enough to stop or even slow the increase in weight gain that has been so apparent over the past couple of decades. But it's a start. The successful losers in the National Weight Control Registry also report exercising frequently and regularly, underscoring the importance of physical activity to the maintenance of a healthy body weight.

The finger pointing indulged in by Mr. Spurlock and others is misleading because it suggests that "fast foods" are the main culprits for the nation's increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity. But the problem is bigger than just one type of food. In fact, any calorically-dense foods, eaten to excess, can add inches to one's girth, especially if unaccompanied by calorie-burning exercise; that should be the real message not that cheeseburgers and fries, (or carbohydrate or fat) automatically make one fat!

Ruth Kava, Ph.D., R.D. is Director of Nutrition at the American Council on Science and Health and is a frequent TCS contributor. She last wrote for TCS about lifestyle choices.
cafeteria nutrition (or lack thereof) and lack of physical education requirements in schools. He also addresses how the fast food industry lures children in at an early age and begins a debate about corporate vs. personal responsibility.

I'm a skeptical filmgoer, and overall, I felt his film was both entertaining (he's a pretty charming guy) and informative. It didn't feel like a publicity stunt or like he had some vendetta against McDonalds. It seemed more like he had this "what if..." idea that, upon further investigation, led to some startling facts and statistics.

Thanks for your time. And if you haven't seen it, I do hope you get the chance.

Danika Dinsmore

May 10, 2004

Everyone with an ounce of intelligence knows that the reason people gain weight is because they consume more calories than they burn. However, claiming that no particular foods are in fact causing people to overeat assumes that calories from all foods leave people equally satiated. For some reason the satiety value of various foods has received little attention from researchers, but what little evidence there is suggests that you get less satiety per calorie when those calories come from energy-dense foods with little fiber and a lot of sugar and/or fat. Why do rodents get much fatter on a "cafeteria diet"? Is it not possible that some foods, such as most of those served at McDonald's, provide less satiety per calorie and so stimulate people to consume excess calories?

By the way: Ms. Zellweger fattened up largely on donuts. They are calorie-dense, low in fiber, and high in fat and sugar. Perhaps she choose them because it is a lot easier to get fat eating them than eating less calorie-dense foods that are less processed and refined? Most people seem to be able to cram down another few hundred calories as dessert (high fat and sugar foods) but would they be equally likely to overeat strawberries?

Jay Kenney

Kava replies:

Yes, I have seen the film. And yes, some of it deals with school foods and lack of phys. ed. in schools. But the main gist of his film was, I think, that the types of foods served in cafeterias and fast food venues are the key to America's obesity problem. This impression was bolstered by the interviews he conducted with Dr. Neal Barnard, who leads a group known to push vegan food choices, and Dr.s Michael Jacobson and Kelly Brownell who both seem to subscribe to the idea that if only soda and French fries were eliminated from American cuisine, the obesity problem might be brought under control. The problem is broader than that: food is ubiquitous in our society -- all kinds of foods and many, many places to buy it. People must be educated to make better choices and to provide role models of a healthy lifestyle for their children.

The fact that Mr. Spurlock stopped exercising did a great deal to cause his weight gain. Another person, Mr. Chazz Weaver, also consumed only McDonald's food for thirty days. Unlike Mr. Spurlock, however, Mr. Weaver continued his regular exercise routine. In spite of the fact that he
ate four or five times per day, and sometimes consumed over 5000 calories, Mr. Weaver actually lost eight pounds and improved his blood cholesterol profile (see his website at www.truthinfitness.org [4])!

Regarding Mr. Kenney's comments: In fact, there has been a great deal of research done on the satiety value of various foods. Dr. Barbara Rolls of Pennsylvania State University has produced a substantial body of work on this issue. Indeed, she has compiled much of her work in a book called *Volumetrics*, which describes how foods with more fiber and water produce greater feelings of fullness. And certainly, if one overeats energy-dense foods like donuts and fries, one is more likely to gain weight. And yes, rats fatten more quickly on "cafeteria" diets. These provide lots of variety along with calories, which stimulates interest in continuing to eat. Thus the issue of how varied and available food is in our society today comes up again. We are not going to pass laws against donuts or fries, so we'd best learn how to deal with them -- eat sparingly and stay active!

**May 14, 2004**

I am a little fed up with people taking a pop at McDonald's. Last year a group of overweight people tried to sue the food chain, blaming it for their obesity. Now I am reading that Morgan Spurlock has documented a month of his life and how living off McDonald's has made him gain twenty-five pounds. Mr. Morgan and the rest of the general public have to realize that it's due to the individual person's genetic make-up. I have been eating McDonald's practically every day for twenty years now, sometimes twice a day. I am here to tell you that I am certainly not overweight. In fact, quite the opposite. I have graced many magazine covers and have done fitness magazines. When I am asked about my diet, my response is simple and truthful: "McDonald's."

Last year I had my annual physical, and as always the results came back normal and healthy. I do go to the gym three days a week, and my routine takes me thirty-five minutes to do. Thus I spend one hour and forty-five minutes a week on my workout. I never do cardio, ever. I am living proof that McDonald's isn't a danger to your health and is not the cause of obesity to everyone. Anyone wishing to dispute what I have written, I dare you to follow me around for a year and document my food consumption. The end result will be the opposite of poor Mr. Spurlock's.

--Enzo Junior

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