

Ban On "Junk Food" Junk Science

By ACSH Staff — May 22, 2005

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Here are just a few of the problems associated with the state House of Representatives' vote this past week to attack childhood obesity and poor nutrition by banning sodas and other snacks from schools:

First, those declaring that vending machines sell junk food have never defined what junk food is. Is it a food that is high in calories? High in sugar? High in fat? Low in nutrient density? Both juice and sugar-sweetened soda contain substantial amounts of sugar and calories. Is a serving of 100 percent orange and apple juice with its 150 calories "junk"? If Coke and Pepsi were to fortify their sodas with vitamins and minerals (some smaller soda companies are already doing this), would soda be transmogrified from a junk food to a health food? And what about the high-fat avocado? Will that be banned too?

Second, food-ban promoters appear to have conflated two distinct issues here: obesity and poor nutrition. There are very few nutritionists who are concerned that a substantial proportion of our kids are not getting sufficient nutrients (except in some very specific cases) on a daily basis. The real problem before us is overnutrition, not undernutrition -- specifically, the overconsumption of calories relative to the number of calories burned - and the resulting accumulation of excess pounds. All foods in our diet, and in the diets of our kids, do not need to be nutrient-dense. There is room in life for fun foods; the key is using them in moderation as part of a varied, balanced diet. In other words, despite the good food/bad food dichotomy that inspires bans, all of us can in fact consume soda, desserts or bourbon (adult fun food?) without becoming obese - if we consume these in moderation and keep physically active.

Given that the real problem we are addressing is obesity, it makes no sense whatsoever to replace soda in schools with fruit juices, as some have recommended.

Third, government banning things may seem like a simple solution, but the reality is that the only way we are going to meet the obesity threat head-on is to educate our children about what their caloric needs are and what the caloric content of various foods are -- while encouraging them to participate regularly in physical exercise.

But, many parents might argue, what would be the downside of getting rid of all the so-called junk food and soft drinks in vending machines - banning them outright from all schools? On one hand, such a move might communicate a message not often heard these days: Eating and drinking all day is not a requirement for good health and nutrition (indeed, just the opposite seems to be true). Perhaps eliminating the vending machines would send the good old-fashioned message that you should eat three square meals a day and forget the frequent snacking. More than thirty years ago,

it was unusual to eat and drink during all waking hours. Today's nonstop obsession with food is new.

However, forbidding the sale of soft drinks and snacks, particularly in high school, might put these products in a forbidden-fruit category that would make them seem even more attractive -- once the final school bell rang and the kids were outside the regulatory authority of the statehouse. What better way to learn how to make informed, intelligent choices about when and how much to eat than in school?

Anyone who has evaluated the statistics must agree that our children and young adults are increasingly overweight to the point that their health is compromised. This problem must be addressed in a systematic, scientific way, giving as much attention to the exercise portion of the equation as we do to the food-consumption part. Targeting specific foods as culprits only distracts us from the larger picture and from solutions that will work.

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