

Since When Do We Pay People to Eat?

By ACSH Staff — June 13, 2005

In the past twenty years, obesity has become an increasingly visible public health problem. [More than 300 million adults worldwide](#) [1] are overweight, and many suffer from potentially life-threatening weight-related illnesses such as diabetes, heart disease, and sleep disorders. Childhood obesity is also a growing problem. As countries begin to acknowledge and seek to combat this burgeoning problem, various government and public educational strategies have been employed to bring weight down to a healthy level -- and yet, people continue to gain weight, often ignoring the likely health consequences.

Perhaps we've failed to make clear the connection between eating and health. Two recent articles [from the BBC](#) [2] and [CNN](#) [3] provide examples of the roundabout ways people think about the topic. One describes an experimental program in which kids get prizes for eating properly, while the other describes contests in which adults get prizes for eating excessively.

In May of 2004, twenty-nine secondary schools in Glasgow, Scotland introduced the "[Fuel Zone Rewards Scheme](#)" [4] in which students earn prizes for buying healthy foods. In this system, students are given a swipe card, and each item of food is logged based on its assigned point value. Selecting pasta, a salad tub, or breakfast cereal earns a pupil fifteen points, while items such as hot dogs or meatballs tally in at only three points. At the end of the year, students may trade in their points for prizes such as cinema tickets (850 points), an Xbox (3,000 points), or an iPod (4,000 points). Scottish officials believe this will prevent many students from leaving campus during lunch and purchasing unhealthy foods.

Much opposition to this "scheme" has been voiced around the globe. Critics call this bribery and argue that this may cause some children to eat more than they want or need for the sake of earning points, or cause them to buy food that they may just throw away. It also seems nonsensical to reward healthy eating with prizes such as video games that promote sedentary activities. Many feel that unhealthy items should simply be removed from school menus, and students should be denied any option of leaving school during lunch hour. Further, since it is impossible to monitor students' eating outside of school, parents must inevitably educate their children about the benefits of eating healthfully and exercising. Ruth Kava, Ph.D, R.D., Director of Nutrition at ACSH, explains that "linking food consumption to points does not educate children about making appropriate, healthful food selections in the context of a varied, balanced diet."

At the opposite end of the spectrum from the Scotland experiment is the increasingly popular "sport" of competitive eating. [ESPN explains](#) [5] that these contests became popular in Japan about a decade ago and hit the U.S. five years later. The events are governed by a ruling body, the [International Federation of Competitive Eating](#) [6]. Their website links to event calendars, eater profiles, records, rankings, ways to join as an eater or host an event, and (fortunately) safety rules,

such as allowing only competitors over the age of eighteen, requiring an emergency medical technician to be present at all events, and warnings not to practice at home.

Like any other sport, competitive eating has its superstar "athletes." These include some seemingly unlikely contestants, such as a ninety-nine-pound woman nicknamed "the Black Widow" who ranks among the world's top three eaters, a married couple both of whom are in the top ten, and the reigning champion, a 137-pound Japanese man. Competitors, called gurgitators, can make up to \$10,000 in a single event, and up to \$200,000 will be awarded this year.

Consequently, gurgitators often take this activity very seriously, and some participate in a yearlong training regimen in order to prepare and expand their stomachs. Doctors have speculated that people with less fat may actually be better able to ingest these quantities because they can expand their stomachs further without being blocked by fat mass, though others feel there is very little scientific explanation for this phenomenon.

While the two trends described above have opposite intended goals -- one promoting health and the other sacrificing health for fun and high-speed gluttony -- both link food choices with monetary rewards. Instead of motivating people with prizes, we need to spread the message that more is not necessarily better, whether we are dealing with hot dog eating contests or "nutritious" school lunches. Instead, health should be the ultimate goal. Surely, these events are not fostering a healthy attitude towards food. Eating has been made into a game, dissociated from its basic function of satiating hunger and providing energy and simple nutrients.

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[1] <http://www.who.int/nut/obs.htm>

[2] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/4565923.stm>

[3] http://money.cnn.com/2005/05/27/pf/eating_to_live/index.htm?section=money_latest

[4] <http://news.scotsman.com/scotland.cfm?id=546052005>

[5] <http://espnradio.espn.go.com/page2/s/caple/020703.html>

[6] <http://www.ifoce.com/>