Kudos to the food industry for cutting back calories

By ACSH Staff — January 9, 2014

What do 78 calories look like? Well, it’s the equivalent of about one medium apple, or a cookie, a glass of milk. It’s also the average number of calories per person per day that some of the largest food companies in the United States have cut from their products. Although 78 may not sound like such a big number, this amounts to a cumulative reduction of about 6.4 trillion calories, according to a study from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

The companies involved include Bumble Bee Foods, PepsiCo, General Mills Inc., Campbell Soup Co., ConAgra Foods Inc., Kraft Foods Inc., Kellogg Co., Coca-Cola Co., PepsiCo Inc. and Hershey Co, and others, and account for 36 percent of calories in all packaged foods and beverages. These efforts to reduce calorie content of foods stems from a pledge taken by these companies in 2010 that they will reduce calories by 1 trillion by 2012 and 1.5 trillion by 2015. To that effect, these companies have used strategies such as shrinking package size, getting rid of oils and reducing the amount of sugar and salt in products, as well as developing completely new, lower calorie products.

However, the analysis by the RWJF does not take into account the efforts made by consumers themselves to reduce calorie intake, so this reduction in calories also has a lot to do with consumer choice, a fact that is being highlighted by some activist groups such as the Center for Science in the Public Interest. However, according to Chavanne Hanson, a dietitian and nutritionist who serves as the wellness champion at Nestle USA, this relationship between consumer and industry is a good thing. As reported to the NY Times, she says, I see an evolution in the way consumers are looking at foods and beverages they purchase. That challenges us, which is great for us and great for society because of how important it is to address the issue of calorie balance and the concerns we have from a public health standpoint about obesity and weight.

ACSH’s Ariel Savransky adds, It’s great that consumers are actively making the decision to consume fewer calories. However, the contributions of industry should not be ignored. This is a huge step that these companies have taken. And realistically, consumers can make all the choices they want, but if the lower calorie products are not available to them, they won’t have the choice to make. We should be grateful to the RWJF no friend of Big Food for doing this semi-quantitative
assessment, thereby giving implicit approval to the strides made by the food industry.

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