Blame for Obesity Epidemic Isn't Junk Food, Study Says

By Ruth Kava — November 6, 2015

Flying in the face of conventional wisdom, a new study that examined a possible link between obesity, and consumption of "junk food" and soda, found that for the majority of Americans there wasn't one.

Drs. Brian Wansink, a scientific adviser for the American Council on Science and Health, and David Just, from the Food and Brand Lab of Cornell University, analyzed a nationally representative sample of American adults' diets and body mass indices (BMI).

They found that, except for underweight and extremely morbidly obese individuals, most Americans were consuming similar amounts of junk foods and sodas. Those on the lower end of the BMI spectrum drank more soda than those who were normal weight, overweight and obese. In contrast, those on the upper end, categorized as extremely morbidly obese, consumed much more french fries.

The researchers compared the different sources of daily calories chosen before the obesity epidemic (in the 1970s) to those chosen at the epidemic's peak (2010). On average, in the ’70s, people consumed about 2,040 calories per day, whereas in 2010 that number had increased to 2,544 calories daily. Further, the categories of foods that had increased the most were grains and added fats.

While one must always be cautious in interpreting retrospective data, which depends on self reports, these results certainly do not support the opinion that sodas and junk foods are primarily responsible for the obesity epidemic but the overall increase in calorie consumption obviously is involved.