8-14-2014

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Latin America Declares War on Junk Food in Bid to Tackle Obesity

by Louisa Reynolds
Category/Department: Region
Published: 2014-08-14

Latin America and the Caribbean face a cruel food paradox. In a region where 47 million people go hungry, 23% of the adult population and 7% of preschoolers are overweight or obese, one of the shocking statistics highlighted in a report published last year by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

Our waistline is expanding, and four Caribbean nations—St Kitts and Nevis, Belize, the Bahamas, and Barbados—are among the top-five countries with the highest prevalence of obesity in adults aged 20 and over. St Kitts and Nevis reports the most worrying figures, with 41% of all adults over 20 years of age suffering from obesity, nearly twice the Latin American average (23%).

Mexico ranks fourth on the list, with 33% of its adult population over age 20 classified as obese, a total of 60 million people, more than the entire population of Central America. Among the South American countries with above-average levels of obesity are Venezuela (31%) and Chile and Argentina (both 29%).

Latin America’s alarming obesity figures are consistent with those reported by other developing countries, reveals a study published by the UK’s Overseas Development Institute (ODI). Today, one in three people across the globe is fat, and, in the developed world alone, a staggering 904 million people are obese, compared with 250 million in 1980. The problem is particularly severe in middle-income countries such as Mexico and Egypt, where the population’s purchasing power has risen and so has its intake of meat and other fatty foods. Coupled with a more sedentary lifestyle as the expanding middle class abandons public transportation in favor of vehicles, the result is an increasingly unhealthy lifestyle that has led to a rise in cancer, diabetes, and heart disease and is already placing a heavy strain on public health services.

"This is a pandemic. It’s not a problem that we’re going to face in the future; we’re already in the midst of a public health crisis. Look at Mexico; diabetes has increased exponentially due to the excessive consumption of sugar, and in ten years’ time that will drive its public health system to bankruptcy," says Enrique Jacoby, a Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) advisor on obesity.

Jacoby puts the blame squarely on a growing fast-food industry with an aggressive marketing strategy that has targeted a particularly vulnerable group: children. "Natural foods such as vegetables, pulses, cereals, fruits, and chicken are being replaced by snacks and sodas. Opening a packet of Doritos is certainly more convenient than preparing a plate of rice and beans, especially when people lead a busy lifestyle and don’t have time to cook," says Jacoby.

Taking on fast-food chains
The global obesity epidemic has set alarm bells ringing. The good news is, though, that the region’s governments are taking the issue seriously and are not afraid of imposing more stringent regulations on product labeling and fast-food advertising.
In Chile, new legislation that comes into effect this year will force food producers to place clear warning labels on their products if they contain high levels of sugar, calories, or fat, similar to the health warnings that tobacco companies are required to place on cigarette packets. Junk-food advertising that targets children will also be outlawed. In November 2013, Ecuador also imposed mandatory food labeling using a traffic-light system, where levels of potentially harmful ingredients are marked as red, with others yellow or green.

Peru, Uruguay, and Costa Rica have banned junk food from school cafeterias. "Banning junk food from schools is very good, but it's also important to educate children about healthy eating habits. Brazil, for example, has introduced vegetable patches in schools so that children can learn about how tomatoes and other vegetables are grown and also about their nutritional value," says nutritionist María José Coloma, one of the authors of the FAO report.

Meanwhile, Mexican authorities have approved a 1 peso tax (about US$0.08) on each liter of soda (SourceMex, Oct. 23, 2013), built cycle paths, and opened free gyms in Mexico City’s slums as part of a plan to help Mexicans shape up and get fit. Latin American governments have proven to be far more successful in taking on soda manufacturers and fast-food companies than developed countries such as the US, where the almighty junk-food lobby has managed to block many attempts to impose tougher regulations on the industry. In New York, for example, the courts struck down former mayor Michael Bloomberg’s plans to outlaw super-size sodas last year.

Coloma argues that it is also important for Latin America and the Caribbean to return to ancestral cooking and teach the new generations to relish beans and tortillas or a plate of quinoa rather than burgers and fries. "We need to return to our ancestors’ eating habits. That needs to be taught at school; the advantage of schools is that you can reach out to the parents and get the whole community involved. Local produce is important; parents and children need to start cooking together because that has been lost," says Coloma.

**Big fat lies?**

Some researchers, however, believe we have been the victims of scaremongering and argue that being overweight and even obese does not necessarily lead to heart disease, diabetes, and other life-threatening diseases.

"Lifestyle manners are far more important than weight. A heavy person with a body mass index that falls under the overweight or obese range but who is very physically active and eats a healthy diet is more likely to have a reduced chance of developing diabetes than someone who is not overweight but who is very sedentary and eats a poor diet," says professor Glenn Gaesser, director of the Healthy Lifestyles Research Center and the Exercise and Wellness Program at Arizona State University (ASU).

Gaesser says a person’s weight is often determined by genetics rather than by diet or exercise patterns, and people whose genetic makeup has made them heavily built will rarely lose a significant amount of weight regardless of whether they swap potato chips for salads or how many hours they spend on the treadmill.

Gaesser’s book Big Fat Lies argues that the weight-loss industry has fuelled an obsession with thinness and has spread the myth that fat equals unhealthy. "The US and most countries in the world seem to worship a thinner body so the weight-loss industry stands to benefit from people who..."
are fat and would like to get thinner. There is a financial consideration with regard to the obesity crisis," says Gaesser. In his opinion, the World Health Organization (WHO) has failed to "factor in physical fitness" in its reports and recommendations.

Jacoby, however, is adamant that, although regular exercise is undoubtedly important, sensible eating habits are the main key to well-being. "A burger, a coke, and a portion of fries can add up to 1,500 calories. To burn no more than 300 calories you need to run for about 40 minutes at a fast pace. We would have to become super athletes in order to burn, process, and metabolize all the calories that junk food contains. It makes far more sense to understand this epidemic as the result of an excessive intake of certain substances," he says.

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