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Fed up with unhealthy food

We educated the public about tobaccos risks, barred certain advertising and availability and focused on the deadly product. Likewise, in the face of our obesity crisis, we should focus on the food.

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The recent surgeon general's report on obesity has stirred important debate, but much of it, and the report itself, skirts the heart of the matter. An epidemic is sweeping the country, the report says, killing 300,000 people a year - almost as many as die from smoking. That's nearly 10 times the death toll of gun-related violence. But in defining the epidemic as obesity, we're misled: Obesity is a result, not a cause. The main problem is the food we're eating.

It's primarily the food that's making us the world's fattest nation - our high-fat, salty, sugar-laden, processed, meat-centered diet, unknown to our species until this generation. This diet is the greatest nutrition experiment ever conducted, and we, the guinea pigs, are faring badly. Overall, six in 10 adults are now overweight or obese.

If the problem was indeed obesity, we would treat obesity-related diseases and encourage exercise as well as moderate eating. But if the problem is the food, well, we'd have to open another door - also asking who makes this food and why, who promotes it and how and who profits from it - a door our surgeon general seems hesitant to crack.

"Individuals lie at the foundation of the solution (to obesity)," says the report. But four decades ago we

didn't callously ignore the plight of those addicted to cigarettes. We educated the public about tobacco's risks, barred certain advertising and availability and focused on the deadly product. Likewise, in the face of our obesity crisis, we should focus on the food.

Some bristle, arguing that people have the right to choose food that's bad for them. But choice requires real options, no coercion and awareness of the consequences - all sadly lacking. (A species choosing to eat what's literally killing it would certainly be an evolutionary first!) Yes, the average American supermarket carries 30,000 items, but arguably 20,000 of them can, over time, make us sick.

Since food companies are the biggest advertisers, we're also inundated daily with images luring us toward what's bad for us. A recent McDonald's commercial on French television claims McDo (as it's called) provides all the basic food groups - neglecting to mention that just one typical McDo meal piles on 1,800 calories and maxes out your recommended daily fat intake.

In our schools, too, choice is narrowing. More than half of the California schools surveyed recently serve Taco Bell, Subway, Dominos, Pizza Hut or other branded foods. Hundreds of school districts have signed "pouring rights" contracts to sell only one soft-drink company's brand, and schools now sell \$750 million in junk food from vending machines each year. This, even though childhood obesity has doubled in the last 20 years and even one additional soft drink a day may increase a child's obesity risk by as much as 60 percent.

Our choices are more constricted still because institutions, including the U.S. Agriculture Department, entrusted with helping us sort out what's healthy and what's not are

influenced by food industry peddlers.

It's no mystery why food companies can easily push the products they do. Human beings evolved with what nutritionists call a "weak satiation" mechanism for sugar and fat - meaning we can eat a lot at one time because this trait served us well as hunter-gatherers. Now it's our Achilles' heel, and food companies have us by that heel.

But we guinea pigs are beginning to rebel. The Washington-based Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine recently won a suit against the Agriculture Department for stacking its panel evaluating the nation's food guidelines with representatives from the meat and dairy industry.

And now some educators and parents have realized fast food in schools is almost as dangerous as cigarettes. At least 20 states have introduced bills to limit low-nutrition foods in schools. Recently Oakland public schools banned all junk food vending machines.

Beyond schools, we all can participate in community-supported agriculture connecting farms with urban consumers. We can enjoy farmers' markets and food co-ops. We can demand public policies making whole foods more readily available and insist that public institutions resist corporate influence. We can require fast-food outlets to display nutrition information. We can even tax unhealthy snack foods to recoup the enormous costs of the diseases of obesity.

Guinea pigs of the world unite! We have nothing to lose but death, disease and love handles.

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