



Americans' 'good food' intake may be backfiring

Most people have clear ideas about foods they consider "bad" and "good." These black-and-white beliefs, however, may be backfiring.

Changes in food production and sales reported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture during the past few decades reflect these beliefs. Relative changes in amounts of foods available for consumption are rather sobering.

Question: What foods are Americans eating less of?

Answer: Between 1970 and 2000, Americans significantly decreased their intake of beef, whole milk and eggs, foods often placed in the "bad" category due to recommendations to cut back on saturated fats and cholesterol. These foods, however, are concentrated sources of a variety of vitamins and minerals. When reduced in the diet, the nutrients they contain need to be replaced.

Q: What foods have Americans increased in their diets?

A: Most notably, the drop in beef was replaced by a substan-

tial increase in chicken and a slight increase in fish. Lower-fat milk consumption is up, even as total milk consumption has dropped almost 30 percent. Calories saved, though, were more than compensated for by an increase in cheese.

Recommendations to use vegetable oils instead of animal fats apparently got through too well. Use of vegetable oils has increased too much.

To see how these changes might affect calorie intake, we made some rough calculations using USDA data to estimate how daily calorie consumption from various types of foods has changed for the average American. Change in calories per day between 1970 and 2000:

- >>Beef: -50
- >>Chicken: +65
- >>Milk: -45
- >>Cheese: +75
- >>Vegetable oils: +200
- >>Wheat flour: +160
- >>Sugar/Corn syrup: +125
- >>Regular sodas: + 70

Although these numbers represent changes in calories avail-

able for consumption rather than what was actually consumed, the changes are quite revealing and likely played a major part in the increasing girth of Americans.

The added 200 calories per day from vegetable oils alone could cause a gain of 20 pounds of fat in a year. Even if half of these oils represented waste, the expected gain would be 10 pounds per year. Add to this a considerable increase in flour and sugars and the formula for obesity is obvious.

Q: What are we doing right?

A: We are getting more fruits and vegetables. But much of the vegetable increase appears to be due to the popularity of pizza. Tomato-sauce topping counts as vegetable intake. Pizza popularity also is reflected by the increase in flour and cheese in the diet.

Being healthy is much more than eating only the "right foods." It requires eating a varied diet in moderation and staying physically active rather than just busy.

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