

On Nutrition: by Helayne Waldman, Ed.D., N.E.

September is Back-to-Junk Food Month

My daughter, heading back to college in a few days, was in the family room watching TV when I overheard this conversation between two characters on the tube: “It’s vile.” “If you drink enough of it, you begin to like it.” “It’s insidious.” Turns out they were two non-earthlings discussing that most human of indulgences – carbonated soft drinks. And these two aliens quickly understood what many of us have yet to completely grasp – we are a culture of junk food junkies, and our schools, regrettably, are one of the quickest routes to the next fix.

A passing peek at the website for Center for Science in the Public Interest (www.cspinet.org) divulges the distressing data. “Americans consume gargantuan quantities of carbonated soft drinks and suffer untoward health consequences. Companies annually produce enough soda pop to provide 557 12 ounce cans – 52.4 gallons – to every man, woman and child in the U.S.” Of those 52.4 gallons, the lion share of imbibing is done by children aged 12-19, whose soda consumption adds up to 15 teaspoons of sugar a day if they’re boys, and 10 teaspoons a day, if they’re girls. This, of course, does not include the additional sugar these kids get from donuts, cakes, cookies and other snack food, also sold in schools.

Several big school districts in California – notably, San Francisco, Oakland, Fresno, and Los Angeles have recently become “soda free,” as a result of intense lobbying and legal action by committed activists. That leaves



hundreds more for whom soda consumption is as much a part of the school day as reading, writing and arithmetic.

I can’t help but wonder, as a nutrition professional, how many of these “soda-enriched” districts would see less aggression, less distraction and less overall behavioral issues if student choices were restricted to real food.

Solid Junk and More

As more and more school districts take a stand on soda, the junk-food industry continues to work overtime insuring that fast food and candy are available in school vending machines. Look down the typical high school hallway and behold what you see: machines filled with Kit Kat bars, Butterfingers, M & M’s, chips, cookies and more.

If the sugar content of these snacks isn’t bad enough, most are also high in refined carbohydrates and the deadly trans fatty acids mentioned frequently in this column. What’s more, there’s a potent carcinogen hiding in those chips and fries. It’s called acrylamide, and was put on the CA state list of chemicals known to cause cancer back in 1990. The

acrylamide issue has been a topic of intensive study by the Center for Science in the Public Interest mentioned above, who measured alarmingly high levels of this toxin in popular American brands of French fries, chips, taco shells, and packaged breakfast cereals. Turns out the big winner was a large order of McDonald’s French Fries, boasting a level of acrylamide that is at least 300 times more than what the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency allows in a glass of tap water.

What, you haven’t heard of acrylamide? That’s because the manufacturers have been resolutely opposed to issuing a warning, claiming they would rather not unduly “alarm” consumers.

That concern will no longer wash, with the recent announcement of a lawsuit the State of California is pursuing against nine top food manufacturers over their reluctance to place such warnings on their popular snack foods. This is no frivolous lawsuit: the defendant list includes heavyweights McDonald’s, Burger King, Frito-Lay and KFC. “Proposition 65 requires companies to tell us when we’re being exposed to potentially dangerous toxins in our food,” explains Attorney General Bill Lockyer. “I have a duty to enforce it.” Let’s hope he succeeds.

Feed Your Children Well

Feeling overwhelmed by the food industry’s devotion to profits over your children’s health? Take heart. You are still in control of many things. For example, if you send

your children off to school well fed, they will be less tempted to purchase toxic snacks and sodas. Give them a high protein breakfast, or start them off with complex carbohydrates and high quality fats. This will stabilize their blood sugar and keep their tummies satisfied for several hours. Eggs and/or multi grain toast with butter will do the job. Pack delicious; filling snacks for them such as fresh fruit, their favorite cut veggies, pistachio nuts, almonds, or walnuts. Personally, I carry around a sugarless whey protein bar, coated with dark chocolate to satisfy my appetite *and* my sweet tooth.

Many kids, my own included, like the idea of having their own water bottle to sip on throughout the day. You might try adding some fruit juice for taste, so that you wind up with a 50/50 mix. Having a refreshment close at hand will temper the impulse buying many kids experience as they breeze by the coke machine.

Talk to your children about the dangers of junk food. It may take many conversations over a long period, but eventually they do get the message. Have patience.

Most of all, remember that you are the primary role model for your children when it comes to eating

habits. If you yourself forsake healthful, nutrient dense meals for sugar-laden snacks and sweets, you are sending a message that it is okay to abuse your body and jeopardize your future well being by consuming garbage. Your children will follow suit.

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