

Maine – Harvard Prevention Research Center

Obesity targets

This article was published in The Bangor Daily News - December 12, 2001, in reaction to the M-HPRC's first workshop: Childhood Obesity The 'Skinny' on soda & T.V..

Health and nutrition specialists from all over Maine have taken aim at two factors in the current obesity epidemic: soda and television. They agreed soda and other sugar-loaded drinks are a leading cause of obesity. As for television, they declared that the average 3.7 hours a day of TV viewing interfered with physical exercise and subjected the couch potatoes to a stream of advertising that promotes soda and fast food.

Harvard specialists started off the recent conference in Augusta with slides that showed how the problem has grown at an exponential rate for the past 20 years, especially in Maine and the Middle West. The title of the down-to-earth workshop by the [Maine-Harvard Prevention Research Center](#) was “Preventing Childhood Obesity: The ‘Skinny’ on Soda and TV.” One of the startling facts presented was that one additional soda a day results in a weight gain of five pounds a year. Dr. Steven Giortmaker, a Harvard sociologist, summed up the problem by stating that the fast food industry gets us to eat more, the advertising makes us buy more and TV and video make us sit still and watch more.

What to do about it? Just telling people to be careful about their diet doesn't help.

Dr. Robert Holmberg, a Bangor pediatrician, puts it more specifically. He advises a daily “5, 2, 1, 0,” meaning five servings of fruit or vegetables, no more than two hours of television, at least one hour of physical activity and zero soda. Others advised reducing the number of television sets in the home and taking them out of the bedroom. That was right in line with most of the speakers and the 115 participants when they broke up into discussion groups. Dr. Holmberg had one caveat: Be careful not to stigmatize overweight kids. Don't think that if everyone overweight stopped drinking sodas and cut out television they would all lose weight.

Some overweight is genetic or “familial,” although most of it results from environmental factors. One participant suggested that fatness seems acceptable now, unlike when fat children were teased 15 years ago. She thought tolerance might be as bad as stigmatizing.

Some participants thought the soft drink manufacturers might be talked into introducing more healthful drinks into their standard products loaded with sugar and caffeine. But Cathryn Knox, principal of Orono High School, told how her school had changed to nothing but nutritious items in the vending machines, on the theory that if kids have a choice they'll take the junk. The modified machines at her school have to be replenished once a day.

Maine's state health officer, Dr. Dora Anne Mills, summed up by saying that the war against soda is about where the war against tobacco was 15 years ago, when "people thought you were nuts if you fought tobacco." She suggested an advertising campaign, but subtler than just telling people "Pepsi is bad." She advised a drive to make it unacceptable for schools to accept the money and free sports scoreboards that the soda promoters use as an incentive. She thought fattening snacks should be taxed, but not like the old "snack tax," which was a revenue measure, not a health measure.

Judging from the enthusiasm and determination at the Augusta workshop, you should be hearing more along those lines. The battle against soda and TV is just beginning.