

America's Diet Downfall

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Out of all the industrialized nations in the world, the United States has the highest obesity rate, which has doubled since 1960. While smoking causes the most deaths each year in America, obesity comes in second as it is the direct cause of death for 280,000 Americans.¹ While there are multiple reasons why people become obese, one of the most determining factors is one's diet. In a recent survey, 73% of Americans said they were somewhat focused on maintaining a healthy diet. Despite that, the average American diet has been declining in nutritional value as the consumption of grains, flours, fats, and oils is up 37% than what it was in the 1970s. Meanwhile, the consumption of meats, dairy, fruits, and vegetables is down 9% from what it was 50 years ago.² The higher consumption of low nutritional food and low consumption of nutritional food has meant a steady increase in diabetes, heart disease, and cancer amongst the American population since 1950. Fortunately for the American public, advances in medical technology have meant death rates from these diseases have decreased over time, but they are still major issues.³ The recent changes to the American lifestyle such as consumption of junk food, lack of home cooking, and economic insecurity all lead to unhealthy eating habits that have put the U.S. into a dangerous, but fixable, health crisis.

I. Junk Food

The rise of junk food has forever changed the food industry and diet in America. The name “junk food” alone should discourage anybody from wanting to consume it, but people become addicted to it quickly. Junk food is processed, which means it is high in saturated fats and added sugars. Those qualities make each bite taste great, but at the same time, unhealthy. On

¹ Schlosser, Eric. *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*. Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012, 1-270.

² DeSilver, Drew. “How America's diet has changed over time.” *Pew Research Center*, 13 December 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/12/13/whats-on-your-table-how-americas-diet-has-changed-over-the-decades/>.

³ Mullins, Kathleen June. “Food or Pharma: How Our American Diet Is Making Us Sick.” *Torch*, Winter 2015, pp. 10–13. *EBSCOhost*, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=117015215&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

top of that, junk food lacks the vitamins and nutrients the body needs, making the health value nothing. Junk food is often seen as a fairly recent creation due to its connections with the modern food industry, but it can be traced back to the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. There, the Rueckheim brothers introduced a snack called Cracker Jacks, which was popcorn covered with molasses and peanuts. The saltiness and sweetness of Cracker Jacks combined with the snack's potential to be mass produced made it the first junk food. Junk food is also characterized as being mass produced; mass production of food can be traced back even further to the early 1800s, when advancements in milling industrialized the process of turning grains into flour. Soft drinks are also a product that is known to give a low nutritional value due to its high amounts of added sugars that are the main contributors to weight gain. In the 17th century, carbonated water was mixed with lemon and honey to make a sweet and fizzy drink. Coca-Cola, the most well known soft drink, was originally used to help digestion in the 1890s before it became a popular drink.⁴ Ever since the creation of junk food, the industry has expanded as today 90% of the money Americans use to buy food is spent on processed foods.⁵

The real issue surrounding junk food is not necessarily the fact that it exists, but rather how Americans became addicted to it so quickly. The 1920s saw a boom in the food industry as Hostess Snack Cakes, Wonder Bread, and Velveeta cheese all came onto the market. As America became more industrialized, these items became more accessible to the average American. Later in the 1950s, corn-syrup based sweeteners made even the smallest of portions, high in calories.⁶ Eating these unhealthy snacks is not necessarily terrible for long term health as long as it is consumed in reasonable amounts. So while the medical industry today tends to attack the junk

⁴ Roos, Dave. "How Junk Food Works | HowStuffWorks." *Food and Recipes | HowStuffWorks*, 3 April 2015, <https://recipes.howstuffworks.com/junk-food.htm>.

⁵ Schlosser, 2012.

⁶ Mullins, 2015.

food industry for promoting unhealthy food, it is the American public that became addicted to these high calorie treats. The junk food industry was continuously evolving due to advancements in processed foods and the American public was never going to turn away from the new and convenient snack options.

II. Fast Food

During the early 1900s, the East Coast of America became more diverse as immigration soared, while the West Coast saw a mass migration of middle class white people from the midwest. This would cause major population growth and by 1940, California's population had doubled what it was 20 years prior. By 1940, there were a million cars in Los Angeles. Then, during World War II, the government spent large amounts of money on building military bases and factories in California making it into an industrial hub. In the 20 year period leading into the 1940s, the restaurant business also saw change as popular places called “drive-ins” emerged everywhere. At these drive-ins, customers would park outside the restaurant and be waited on and served without having to leave their car. Jesse G. Kirby, who started the first drive-in chain called Pig Stand said, “People with cars are so lazy they don't want to get out of them to eat!” The American public exemplified that statement exactly as drive-ins became the popular place to be. The drive-in culture even began to expand outside of food as Americans were able to go to church, movies, and banks all without leaving their car. In 1948, Richard and Maurice McDonald opened a new kind of restaurant called McDonalds that would kickstart the fast food industry because it was faster, more efficient, and cheaper than drive-ins.⁷

The rapid expansion of the fast food industry can be attributed to the family environment, uniformity, and accessibility. The previous phenomenon of drive-ins were popular meeting spots for teenagers because of the ties to car culture and modern technology, but fast food was

⁷ Schlosser, 2012.

something for the whole family to enjoy. When McDonalds introduced Playlands in the 1970s, they brought in more kids as well as their parents, which meant full families were coming in, not just teenagers. Today, 90% of children in America visit a fast food establishment each month due to the successful marketing towards children. As McDonalds expanded to 3,000 locations in 1973, more fast food chains began to open such as Burger King, Dominos, Taco Bell, and KFC. With the start of franchising, Americans were able to enjoy their favorite restaurants' food at many different locations, all with the same quality and taste. Each year, Americans spend \$110 billion on fast food as a quarter of all adults visit a fast food restaurant each day.⁸ The beginning of the fast food era was basic, because there was not much to choose from other than a burger and fries, but once the industry expanded, there was something for everyone that was cheap and convenient.

For decades, the fast food industry has been pushing large portion sizes and unhealthy cooking methods, which has accelerated the obesity epidemic in America. When fast food first started 70 years ago, the average soft drink size for kids and adults was 8 oz, but today the kids' size is 12oz while a large is up to 32oz. The calories that come from these added sugars make up over a quarter of the daily recommended calories. Until 1990, McDonalds would fry their fries in beef tallow making the saturated fats levels extremely high for consumers. Small amounts of saturated fat throughout a day will not damage health, but the consumption of too much can lead to high cholesterol and even heart problems. After many complaints, McDonalds eventually switched to using vegetable oil. When McDonalds stopped frying their McNuggets in beef tallow, they began adding beef additives to the McNuggets to make up for lost beef flavor. This unfortunately made McNuggets contain twice as much fat per ounce than a hamburger patty. The consumption of these extremely unhealthy foods by children has gone hand and hand with the

⁸ Schlosser, 2012

steady rise in obesity rates since the 1970s. Today, the average American consumes fast food meals at least twice per week. Most of the time these items from fast food restaurants contain beef additives and high levels of saturated fat.⁹

The health issues that have risen with the popularity of fast food in America have also been seen in other countries. In China, fast food was originally seen as American modernization, yet the Chinese population bought into the idea of a quick, simple, and cheap meal. In the past decade alone, the number of overweight teenagers in China has doubled along with the consumption of fast food. Japan is known worldwide for being an overall healthy country, but since the arrival of McDonalds in the 1970s, the child obesity rate has doubled and one third of all Japanese adults are obese. Europe also has a high prevalence of fast food chains. In Great Britain, the number of fast food restaurants doubled from 1984 to 1993 and at the same time the number of obese adults did the same. In countries such as Italy and Spain where fast food does not have a major presence, neither does obesity. Fast food has taken over many different parts of the world as in Brazil, Germany and Australia, McDonalds is the largest private employer.¹⁰

Fast food has dominated the global market in places such as China who even originally wanted to reject it, which shows the industry's tremendous success. So while initially fast food only fit perfectly into the rapidly changing American culture, it began to perfectly fit the needs of other countries. Different cultures were willing to buy into the idea of a meal that makes life much easier, because it involves no cooking, no shopping for ingredients, and a friendly cost. This model however, has caused a deadly health issue, primarily in the United States. Despite healthier fast food options such as salads and Subway, the fast food industry is still dominated by unhealthy burgers and fries. Today, this industry is not going to become less unhealthy, and if

⁹ Schlosser, 2012.

¹⁰ Schlosser, 2012.

anything more advancements in processed food technology should make it more unhealthy. The same goes for junk food as brands are constantly coming out with new flavors and snacks for the American public to become addicted to. While the food industry is just businesses and corporations trying to make money, the American public has paid a deadly price and without major changes, more health issues will arise.

III. Cooking

Up until the 1920s, the American diet was mostly balanced and healthy as it was primarily cooked at home. Most of the time, the main dishes would consist of meats, vegetables, and fruits, all forming a balanced diet. The 1920s saw the rise of fast and processed foods, which meant more meals were being eaten outside of home, and even home cooked meals could contain premade ingredients. This shift would also bring a rise in coronary heart disease amongst Americans.¹¹ Restaurant food is known to have high levels of salt and saturated fats, which might make for a better tasting meal, but too much can lead to health problems such as high cholesterol and blood pressure. On the other hand, cooking at home gives the ability to control the ingredients by using low sodium, sugar free, and whole grain products if desired. Cooking at home is not just great for maintaining a balanced diet, but it is also beneficial for people who are trying to lose weight because it usually leads to the consumption of fewer calories, fats, and sugars.¹² By staying away from restaurant foods, Americans can maintain a healthy diet because of the ability to control what ingredients are put into their food.

A recent study has shown that people who eat more home cooked meals per week have a healthier diet than those who eat more away from home. From 2007 to 2010, 8% of American adults lived in a household where dinner was cooked zero or one time per week. This diet of

¹¹ Mullins, 2015.

¹² Kerr, Gord. "Why You Should Opt for Home-Cooked Meals Over Fast Food." *Livestrong*, 29 December 2018, <https://www.livestrong.com/article/517636-homecooked-meals-vs-fast-food-meals/>.

processed foods that contain high levels of saturated fat and added sugar leads to the consumption of 2,300 calories per day. At the same time, adults who cooked six or seven times per week consumed 2,271 calories per day. The individuals who cooked zero or one time per week also consumed up to five more grams of fat and 16 more grams of sugar per day than the frequent home eaters.¹³ Over the course of a day, the difference in nutritional value between the two diets is not much. Throughout a week however, the gap grows to 35 grams of fat and 112 grams of sugar making one diet clearly more healthy. Cooking at home does not guarantee a perfect diet, but it allows for fresh and healthier ingredients to be used more often. Eating away from home is fine one or two nights a week, but diet quality significantly drops when there is little home cooking and more eating out.

This drop in home cooking in the United States is due to a lack of food education, women joining the workforce, and time constraints. Some adults choose not to cook much because they either do not know how to or do not have the proper knowledge of the food industry. This can lead to more consumption of junk and fast food because it is easier than having to deal with a difficult task. A way to get around this is to teach cooking skills in school so people have the right confidence later in life. For most of the 20th century, housewives would stay home and do the cooking for the family. This meant that there were home cooked meals every night, which leads to an overall healthier diet. As women started to work more and families began to depend on both parents working, there was not somebody at home to do the cooking. This also leads into another challenge of families not having enough time to cook a meal most of the week because of time constraints. This can be caused by parents needing to work late hours in order to support

¹³ Wolfson, Julia A., and Sara N. Bleich. "Is cooking at home associated with better diet quality or weight-loss intention?" *Cambridge University Press*, vol. 18, no. 8, 2015. *Cambridge.org*, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/public-health-nutrition/article/is-cooking-at-home-associated-with-better-diet-quality-or-weightloss-intention/B2C8C168FFA377DD2880A217DB6AF26E>.

the family which means that there is not enough time to prepare a nutritious meal, so eating out is the better option.¹⁴

The emergence of companies such as HelloFresh, who deliver fresh ingredients along with easy recipes straight to homes, allows adults with time constraints to make healthy meals at home. Some grocery stores also offer home delivery, which can make the whole process easier because getting the ingredients is half the task. These modern-day advances have enabled time-pressed Americans the opportunity to prepare healthy meals, though delivery services have a cost beyond the cost of the groceries, which not all families can afford. As a result, unfortunately, the unhealthy fast food option will continually be the easiest route for adults who lack the necessary skills, time, or money to make healthy meals.

IV. Food Deserts

Food deserts across the United States make it hard for some Americans to live on a healthy diet. “Food deserts” are areas where the residents do not have convenient access to a grocery store or supermarket. For food deserts in rural areas, people must travel at least ten miles to the nearest supermarket. This is problematic because getting fresh ingredients, especially fruits and vegetables, is necessary for a healthy diet. It is estimated that 19 million Americans live in food deserts across the country in areas that usually have small populations, high unemployment rates, and low income rates. Due to grocery stores being so far away, the problem for many is not having convenient transportation to get to stores that are long distances away.¹⁵

While food deserts lack grocery stores, they usually have many corner stores and fast food restaurants. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend that people eat a balance of fruits, vegetables, fat-free dairy, lean meats, poultry, fish, and eggs. All of these items can be

¹⁴ Wolfson and Bleich, 2015.

¹⁵ Annie E. Casey Foundation. “Exploring America's Food Deserts.” *The Annie E. Casey Foundation*, 13 February 2021, <https://www.aecf.org/blog/exploring-americas-food-deserts>.

purchased at grocery stores so people in food deserts cannot necessarily obtain these items. However, these areas usually have many corner stores and fast food restaurants that are the most convenient option for food. This means that people who live in food deserts consume large amounts of saturated fats, added sugars, and sodium. Due to this diet, there is often a high prevalence of obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease in food deserts.¹⁶ For being an extremely industrialized and modern country, people should not have to travel so far just to acquire basic food needs. The corner stores and fast food restaurants in these areas offer the only way some people can obtain food. Even though food deserts contribute towards health problems in the United States, the people living in the areas are not at fault because they are limited to unhealthy options.

Encouraging more farmers markets, funding more grocery stores, and making obtaining groceries easier are all ways to improve the dietary health conditions in food deserts. The most important issue in food deserts is the lack of local grocery stores. By encouraging community food markets, more people could be inspired to grow local produce from which the whole community could benefit. Grocery stores do not open in food deserts because there is a risk that they will not be profitable. If supermarkets were given incentives to open in food deserts, then the residents would have better access to fresh and quality food. Even though there are online services for people to order food, delivery can be pricey. To make food delivery more affordable for people in food deserts, more programs should be installed to help people pay for their groceries.¹⁷ These changes would be great for improving dietary health in food deserts, but the funding would need to come from the government or at least large organizations. In general,

¹⁶ Marengo, Katherine. "Food deserts: Definition, effects, and solutions." *Medical News Today*, 22 June 2020, <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/what-are-food-deserts>.

<https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/what-are-food-deserts#health-impact>

¹⁷ Marengo, 2020.

more should be done to promote healthier foods while at the same time spread awareness about the dangers of junk food. For many people living in food deserts, junk and fast food is the only option to eat and until that changes, dietary diseases will continue to rise.

V. Dietary Guidelines

The United States Government has made an effort to encourage healthier eating habits through the recurring Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Before these guidelines became official in the 1970s, nutritional experts recommended cutting excess calories from the daily diet. In 1977, a U.S. Senate committee recommended the Dietary Goals. These goals said to only consume as many calories as one burns, consume natural sugars, consume more fruits and vegetables, and stay away from butter. After some backlash around the lack of scientific evidence to back up the claims, the U.S. Senate committee partnered with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Department of Health to make official guidelines that would be revised every five years. The first official Dietary Guidelines in 1980 recommended having a balanced diet, cutting back on fat and cholesterol, and avoiding added sugars. After recognizing that the food industry was becoming more unhealthy, the U.S. Government did a decent job at guiding Americans towards a healthier diet.¹⁸

However, the dietary guidelines should focus more on regulating the food industry rather than focusing on people's personal eating habits. Food companies are businesses trying to make money, and they do this by continuously coming out with new snacks for American consumers, such as the endless amount of sugar filled breakfast cereal flavors. Unfortunately, these new snacks are often more unhealthy than the previous ones. One of the best ways to regulate the food industry is to require cutting back on ads that promote unhealthy snacks and fast food and

¹⁸ Sifferlin, Alexandra. "The History of the U.S. Dietary Guidelines | Time." *TIME*, 7 January 2016, <https://time.com/4125642/dietary-guidelines-history/>.

instead spreading awareness of the dangers surrounding processed foods. Another option is to put warning labels on foods if they contain certain amounts of saturated fat, sodium, and added sugar.¹⁹ If people saw the same amount of ads that combat the food industry as they did that promote it, then it would be impossible to avoid hearing about the negative effects. The same could happen with the warning labels because after a while they would be hard to ignore. People being told and warned about the dangers of what they are eating would be more beneficial than people being told what they should eat.

VI. Effects On America

The booming fast food industry, lack of home cooking, and food deserts have put the U.S. in a dangerous place. There has never been more advertising for fast food than today, as the average American teenager sees up to five fast food ads per day. Without limiting the amount of advertising fast food companies can do, especially ads directed to children, the obesity rates will continue to rise. Even though the average American family cooks four to five times per week, daily life has not gotten less busy and eating out will continue to be the most convenient dining option. On top of that, the price of organic food has never been higher, while there are endless options for inexpensive processed foods for consumption.²⁰ While it is true that there needs to be more regulation on the food industry as a whole, the concept of consuming junk and fast food is not disappearing at all. Not only does support need to come from the government, especially to help the people that live in food deserts, change needs to happen amongst the country's children. Teaching healthy diet practices and cooking skills in school will give the next generation some of the skills and knowledge needed to navigate the growing food industry. The health effects of the

¹⁹ Nestle, Marion. "Regulating the Food Industry: An Aspirational Agenda." *American Journal of Public Health*, vol. 112, no. 6, June 2022, pp. 853–58. *EBSCOhost*, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=157068710&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

²⁰ Schlosser, 2012.

poor American diet are irreversible, but any reform at this point can help make the situation even the slightest bit better.

VII. Diets Around the World

Out of all the G7 countries, which are Japan, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States, Japan has the highest life expectancy. The Japanese population is known around the world to have one of the healthiest diets. This remains true despite the recent rise of fast food consumption in the country, over the past decades. Unlike the United States, Japan has low rates of death from obesity, cardiovascular disease, and cancer, which can be attributed to their healthy diet. Japan has a high consumption rate of fish, soybeans, green tea, and a variety of grains, fruits and vegetables. At the same time, Japan has low consumption rates of fatty red meats, high sodium foods, and sugar sweeteners. This means out of all the G7 countries, Japan consumes the least amount of red meat and sugar. Japan's high consumption of fish means they consume more marine fatty acids than normal fatty acids from red meat. Soybeans, which are primarily consumed in Asia, contain anti-cancer and anti cardiovascular disease isoflavones.²¹ This diverse diet should serve as a model for the rest of the world. Other countries should not be expected to copy the exact diet practices of another country, but there are lessons to be learned for each country. Even small changes such as consuming low sodium foods and eliminating sugar sweeteners can go a long way in improving long term health.

The Mediterranean diet can also serve as a healthy diet model for other countries to follow. While there are over 20 countries that are classified as "Mediterranean," Italy, Greece, Spain, France, Morocco, and Egypt are commonly associated with the diet. The Mediterranean diet consists of lots of fish, grass fed animals, nuts, figs, and wild plants. All of these items also

²¹ Tsugane, Shoichiro. "Why has Japan become the world's most long-lived country: insights from a food and nutrition perspective." *European Journal of Clinical nutrition*, vol. 75, 921-928., 2020. *Nature.com*, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41430-020-0677-5#citeas>.

have omega-3 fatty acids which are great in preventing heart disease, stroke, arthritis, and cancer. This extremely natural diet is high in Vitamins E and C, folate, and calcium. Aside from the food, the Mediterranean diet also promotes a healthy lifestyle by encouraging physical activity at least once per day. In a recent study, people with cardiovascular disease were put on a Mediterranean diet, which decreased their chance of having a cardiovascular event by 30%.²² This great Mediterranean diet and lifestyle is directly related to Italy having the highest life expectancy in the world, of 83 years.²³

Some people look at these healthy diets around the world and think that they cannot be copied due to not having all of the ingredients from the area. However, there are many food substitutions that can be made in order to recreate the diet with foods one has access to. There are many different vegetables and grains throughout the world with the same health benefits, which makes it possible for people to build a diet that works best for them. Trying healthy foods that are not necessarily local can be beneficial because balance within the diet is more important than the individual foods.²⁴ Some people forget that physical activity is just as important as the food one eats. On top of that, physical activity can be anything from just walking to playing a sport, so for some people, physical activity is part of daily life. A person's lifestyle needs to be healthy in order for their diet to have a true effect. There is so much to learn about the diets and lifestyles of other countries that can help lead to healthier eating habits and great long-term health.

²² Robson, Diana. "Positive Effects of the Mediterranean Diet in the Prevention and Management of Cardiovascular Disease: A Literature Review." *Journal of the Australian Traditional Medicine Society*, vol. 20, no. 3, Spring 2014, pp. 200–05. *EBSCOhost*,

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=98766011&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

²³ The Daily Meal Staff. "What Do People Eat in Countries with the Longest Life Expectancies?" *The Daily Meal*, 20 February 2015, <https://www.thedailymeal.com/travel/what-do-people-eat-countries-longest-life-expectancies>.

²⁴ Rosenbloom, Cara. "How to translate the Mediterranean diet to any cuisine." *Washington Post*, 15 Sept. 2021, p. NA. *Gale In Context: High School*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A675509862/SUIC?u=watkinson&sid=bookmark-SUIC&xid=bfa61985.

VIII. Conclusion

The major changes to the American lifestyle in the 20th century would help form the modern day junk and fast food industry. The popularity of drive-ins due to their accessibility led to the creation of fast food restaurants, which made obtaining meals easily accessible, quick, and cheap. Not only has fast food taken over America, but it has expanded and succeeded in global markets as well. Frequent home cooking often leads to consumption of fewer calories and better long term health over a diet of frequent eating out. Unfortunately, America has seen a drop in home cooking due to Americans not having enough time to cook every day and people not being taught cooking and food education in school. On top of that, food deserts across America make it hard for people to obtain the necessary groceries to make meals at home.

These three things have resulted in a substantial rise in obesity and other dietary diseases in America. While there was once little awareness of the dangers of the food industry, today the government continuously puts out guidelines that the American public can follow to have a healthy diet. On top of that, there are endless amounts of programs and companies that offer solutions to lose weight and promote healthy eating. Grocery delivery services make the task of home cooking easier for busy Americans as half of the job is already done for them. With more government funding, programs and grocery stores can help improve the issues that make obtaining healthy food harder in food deserts. While there is still much progress to be made in improving diet in America, the solutions are all the disposal of Americans.