

Candy, soda, and fast food are not driving the rising obesity trend in the US

November 5 2015, by Katherine Baildon

Soda, candy, and fast food are often painted as the prime culprits in the national discussion of obesity in the United States. While a diet of chocolate bars and cheese burgers washed down with a Coke is inadvisable from a nutritional standpoint, these foods are not likely to be a leading cause of obesity in the United States according to a new Cornell University Food and Brand Lab study conducted by the Lab co-directors David Just, PhD, and Brian Wansink, PhD. The study, published in *Obesity Science & Practice*, finds that intake of these foods is not related to Body Mass Index in the average adult.

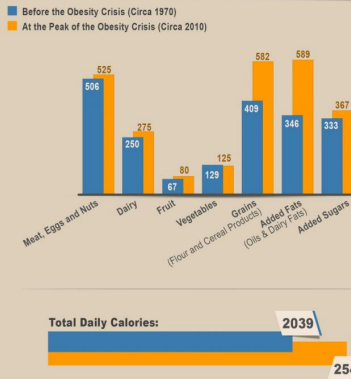
Researchers Just and Wansink reviewed a nationally representative sample of adults in the United States and found that consumption of soda, candy and [fast food](#) is not linked to Body Mass Index (BMI) for 95% of the population. The exception is those who are on the extreme ends of the BMI spectrum: those who are chronically underweight and those who are morbidly obese. Given that there was no significant difference in consumption of these indulgent foods between overweight and healthy weight individuals, the researchers concluded that the overwhelming majority of weight problems are not caused by consumption of [soda](#), candy and fast food alone. "This means," explains Dr. Just, "that diets and health campaigns aimed at reducing and preventing obesity may be off track if they hinge on demonizing specific foods." He adds, "If we want real change we need to look at the overall diet, and physical activity. Narrowly targeting junk foods is not just ineffective, it may be self-defeating as it distracts from the real underlying causes of obesity."

These findings suggest that clinicians and practitioners seeking to help individuals obtain a healthy weight should examine how overall consumption patterns, such as snacking, and physical activity influence weight instead of just eliminating "junk foods" from patient's diets.

IS JUNK FOOD TO BLAME FOR OBESITY IN THE U.S.?

OVERWEIGHT AND OBESITY RATES HAVE INCREASED SINCE THE 1970s BUT ARE THE COMMON CULPRITS FAST FOOD, SODA AND CANDY—ACTUALLY TO BLAME?

DAILY CALORIES CONSUMED BY THE AVERAGE AMERICAN¹

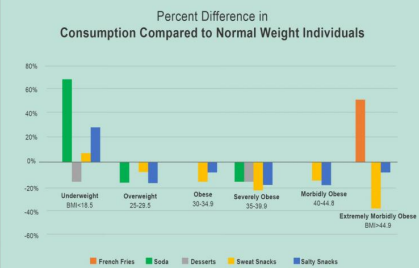


Soda and desserts are often blamed for high obesity rates because they are very calorie dense, while providing little nutrition. Such junk foods are high in added sugars. However, the bulk of the increase in calorie intake as obesity rates rose was from grains and fats.

¹ United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. (2015). Food Availability (Per Capita) Data System. Retrieved from <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-availability-per-capita-data-system>

WHAT ABOUT FAST FOOD, SODA, AND CANDY?

- Everyone knows that eating too much junk food can lead to obesity, but overeating junk food does not appear to be the root cause of obesity in the U.S.
- Overweight, obese, severely obese and even morbidly obese individuals consume almost as much soda, French fries, desserts, sweet snacks, and salty snacks as normal weight individuals.
- The only groups who on average consume more junk foods are those who are underweight and to a lesser extent the extremely morbidly obese.
- For all but those out in the far extremes, there is no relationship between junk food consumption and weight.



For 95% of Americans represented there is no relationship between intake of these foods and BMI.

² David Just and Brian Wansink (2011). Fast Food, Soft Drink, and Candy Intake is Unrelated to Body Mass Index for 95% of American Adults. *Obesity Reviews* 12(12)

SO, WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THOSE COMBATING OBESITY?

Americans are eating over 500 calories more per day than 4 decades ago. Unfortunately avoiding soda, candy and fast food is no silver bullet for weight loss. Here is what you can do to maintain a healthy weight:

DON'T: Deprive yourself of your favorite foods because that can result in frustration and ultimately have little impact on overall weight

DO: Monitor overall calorie consumption from meals and snacking

DO: Be conscious of intake of added fats like salad dressing, cooking oils, cream, and sour cream and things containing lots of flour such as cereal, breads and baked goods as these are the foods that Americans are eating more of.

Credit: Cornell University, Food and Brand Lab

More information: David Just and Brian Wansink (2015). Fast Food, Soft Drink, and Candy Intake is Unrelated to Body Mass Index for 95% of American Adults. *Obesity Science & Practice*, forthcoming.
[onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/1002/\(ISSN\)2055-2238](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/1002/(ISSN)2055-2238)

Provided by Cornell Food & Brand Lab

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