



CONSUMER CONFUSION

By Henk Hoogenkamp

In the old days or in traditional societies, people were not incessantly being bombarded with the temptation to eat. However, today's contemporary consumers are constantly reminded to eat, even when they are not hungry. The main reason is the wide availability of ready-to-eat convenience foods in a setting of a 24/7 society. The modern food environment, engineered for maximum enjoyment, will trigger compulsive overeating that ultimately results in obesity and lead to developing degenerative diseases.

Although more consumers are now aware of the negative health implications arising from certain fat and sugar-loaded foods, enjoyment and indulgence still have a much greater influence on consumption choice rather than health reasons.

Many people in developed countries and affluent societies typically do not worry too much about calorie consumption. The body weight in most developed countries has been steadily increasing to alarming levels, with a growing discrepancy between calorie reference data

and the misreporting of actual calorie consumption.

Serving sizes are typically understated and do not reflect portions that people usually eat -meaning they are bigger than serving sizes stated on food labels and nutrition facts. Making the calorie count bigger and bolder on the food label is the right thing to do, which hopefully resonates with purchasing decisions of consumers.

As a side note, images of junk food are much more distracting

than health food photos, which underscores people's implicit bias for fatty, sugary foods, and confirms the old adage that it is a bad idea to grocery shop hungry.

The Eyes are Bigger Than the Stomach

Unfortunately, the fact remains that people are still inclined to consume more food or drinks from larger size portions or packages. Reducing the availability of larger portion sizes and restricting pricing practices that enable larger package sizes to cost less in relative terms, is a suitable intervention to reduce calorie intake.

The discrepancy between nutritional sound portion sizes and what people actually eat contributes to the uncertainty about the appropriate amount of food. Let's face it -most people eat until their stomach is full, and often a bit more than full. Overconsumption can lead to significant health ramifications, and portion-distortion plays a major role in the rampant obesity problems. Satiation is a subjective definition, which greatly differs from person to person.

For the food industry, the message to eat less is potentially problematic. The food industry is not likely to address this topic anytime soon, considering that all marketing plans are based on selling more, not less. Healthy eating should be more than a short-term resolution because it is about lifestyle and not just a gimmick to cut calories and lose weight.

Animal Fat Phobia

Since the early 1970s, the establishment of the dietetic world of self-proclaimed "experts" has

demonized saturated fat as the number one evil causing strokes, heart disease, and obesity.

For decades, animal saturated fat has been the most vilified nutrient in the diet of affluent societies. Now it seems that dietary animal fat may not be the nutritional bogeyman that it has been portrayed by the unrelenting wave of media coverage. Butter is back in fashion, and so are the saturated fats.

For at least 50 years, scientists have been presenting and preaching evidence linking saturated fats -like those found in animal products- with cardiovascular disease. Dating back to at least the early 1970's under the leadership of the global margarine giants, the consumer has been bombarded with a never-ending barrage of propaganda about the ill effects of animal saturated fat.

The same margarine industry "conveniently" forgot to inform the consumer that much of the non-saturated fat was in the form of transfat and that most of the polyunsaturated fats were, in fact, chemically-extracted oils. As a result, new foods that were hyper-processed, containing a long list of additives to allow for a transformation of natural to the "new healthy", filled the shopping carts. The arrival of these so-called "healthy" but ultra-processed margarine spreads and sugar-loaded foods in the 1970's was probably the most important factor contributing to the current obesity crisis crippling a large number of people around the world.

Fat Phobia

In the early 2000s, reduced fat foods became the norm for many

people. This form of fat-phobia will not leave the mindset of consumers anytime soon, though it is increasingly clear that a rethinking of nutritional guidelines is in the making. For example, the closer milk is to zero percent fat, the more the omega-3 fatty acid benefits and the naturally-occurring Vitamins A and D are eliminated. Actually, whole milk may be a better satiety agent, reducing the intake of other forms of calorie consumption.

There is an urgent need for a careful reappraisal of the current nutritional guidelines. There are simply too many conflicting publications that confuse consumers. Based on the new scientific findings, the national committees on health guidelines are expected to not only revisit the heart health issues but also update their policies, and stop demonizing foods that contain saturated fats, such as those present in meat, milk, and cheese.

The switch from a diet with saturated fats in dairy and meat has resulted to an increased carbohydrate consumption, which -many researchers now believe- has contributed to the current crisis of obesity and diabetes T2. Over the last 50 years, scientists who were wedded to their theories about saturated fat and heart disease, tried to protect their hypothesis and "silence" or discredit opposing studies.

It was only in 1995 when the Americans became exceptionally alarmed by the fat content of food. At the beginning of the second decennia of the 21st century, their concerns were far more wide-ranging. Nutrition guidelines were overhauled again in 2015 to reduce sodium, limit starchy vegetables, and ban transfat. Other dietary changes included the increase

of wholegrain, more unsalted nuts, fruits and vegetables, and limiting the number of calories in general. Wholegrain, vegetables and fruit have the potential to become a mainstay in the typical west-European diet, though animal-derived protein sources remain an important component.

Breaking News: The Return of Animal Fat

Another breaking-news food story monopolized the airwaves suggesting that billions of people might have been barking up the wrong tree all these years regarding limiting dietary fat intake.

At the 2017 congress of European Society of Cardiology in Barcelona, a study showed that people aged 35 to 70 with a high fat dietary pattern from 18 low, middle, and high income countries, appeared to be associated with a lower risk of premature deaths by any cause, while a high carbohydrate diet is associated with a worse long-term outcome.

The study findings are a departure from the recommendation to limit total fat intake to less than 30 percent of energy calories, and saturated fat intake to less than 10 percent of energy calories. Limiting total fat consumption does not appear to improve overall health of the population. Actually, increasing fat intake to cover for about 35 percent of energy calorie requirements and reducing carbohydrates intake may lower risk of death.

For decades, dietary guidelines have focused on reducing total fat and saturated fatty acid intake in particular. However, the new study data suggests otherwise, and as a result has

given a unique opportunity to see the impact of diet on total mortality (death) and cardiovascular disease in diverse settings, some wherein over-nutrition is common and others where under-nutrition is of greater concern.

In the poorer demographic areas where undernutrition -but increasingly also malnutrition- is prevalent, the general population is much better at restricting sources of high-carbohydrates foods, as well as adding additional sources of fats like coconut oil, dairy and other protein contributors such as eggs, fish, meat and plants and nuts.

People who eat high levels of carbohydrate-formulated foods, particularly refined sugars like those found in fizzy drinks and ultra-processed snacks, face a higher risk of early death. Low-fat diets put populations at increased risk for cardiovascular disease. Loosening the restrictions on total fat and saturated fat while imposing limits on carbohydrates to moderate levels is the best bet for sustained health.

The right "sweet spot" would be around 35 percent of energy calories coming from fat and an average of 50 percent of energy calories from carbohydrates -of which only 5 percent should be plain sugar. A high carbohydrate diet -greater than 60 percent of energy calories- is associated with higher risk of mortality. Higher intake of fats, including saturated fats, is associated with lower risk of mortality. However, diet has little impact on heart death risk, suggesting it has a greater impact on other killers like cancer, dementia, respiratory disease, and diabetes type 2.

The new dietary guidelines are in stark contrast with the avalanche of low-fat recommendations that besieged the world in the mid-1990s. The study published in The Lancet dated August 29, 2017 has set off a wave of media coverage and opinions - both pros and cons- and is still gaining traction in 2020. This study can be seen as a complete U-turn and might signal the end of the demonization of fat.

Another Twist in the Cholesterol Saga?

Cholesterol is another hotly-debated issue and has been a longstanding arch-villain in the western diet. Supported by self-interest pharma- and food companies who have sponsored paid university studies for scientific backup to demonstrate the urgency to lower cholesterol levels since the 1970s to avoid heart disease and clogged arteries. For many decades, consumers in the developed countries were alarmed to go easy or avoid altogether saturated fat present in butter, full-fat dairy products like cheese, and coconut oil.

It remains to be seen if legislative authorities such as the EFSA, FDA and USDA will ease the strict cholesterol-intake guidelines if the emerging relationship between consumption of dietary cholesterol and serum (blood) cholesterol remain a substance of dietary concern.

The bottomline of the new thinking about cholesterol intake is that if a person eats more foods rich in this substance, the body will make less. On the other hand, if cholesterol is deprived from the dietary intake, the body makes more.

The majority of the cholesterol is produced by the liver, and the brain is primarily made up from cholesterol, which is essential for nerve cells to function. In its own right, cholesterol is the basis for the creation of all steroid hormones, including estrogen, testosterone, and corticosteroids.

In the new medical world, there is a growing belief that saturated fats and cholesterol in the diet are not the cause of coronary heart disease. Routinely, a body needs 950mg of cholesterol for daily metabolism and the liver is the main contributor. Only some 15 percent cholesterol is given by the dietary intake. If cholesterol intake is reduced, the liver will make up for the difference to maintain the daily requirement of 950mg.

It is likely that the controversy between the food and pharmaceutical industries -who all generate zillions of profits- such as the sales of pharma statins and low-fat foods- and the new emerging medical evidence about the "cholesterol scam" won't end anytime soon. For now, consumers remain in the dark about what, and what not to believe; something similar is happening about the truth of hidden sugar consumption.

Lifestyle Diet Variables

Besides the influence of human genetic precondition that also regulates energy efficiency, there are important changes occurring in the lifestyle of consumers in modern socio-cultural, demographic, occupational or professional settings. What has changed in the past few decennia are the different ways in which people consume food. In particular, there is an unmistakable trend that

REX TECHNOLOGIE VACUUM FILLER & PORTIONING SYSTEMS

RVF 220-900

REX Technologie GmbH & Co. KG
 Irlachstrasse 31 • A-5303 Thalgau
 Phone +43(0)6235-6116-0
 Fax +43(0)6235-6529
 Mail: sales@rex-technologie.com
 www.rex-austria.com

more food is consumed in liquid form. Increasingly, solid food is manipulated or modified to make it available in liquid form. Some examples that come to mind are liquefied vegetables, proteins, fruits, breakfast cereals and candy. Food out of a bottle might be convenient and fast. However, there is also a hypothesis that satiety from liquid food is significantly less than solid food. As a result, the body will welcome additional consumption of calories even though the satiation point has already been passed.

Another major change in food intake is the way people eat food. The enormous popularity of fast food has gradually moved people away from eating meals with spoon, fork, and knife. The traditional way of eating meals with utensils is partly replaced by consuming handheld foods, such as wraps, pizzas, burgers, fries, pies, and the like. To make matters worse, these handheld foods quite often contain high amounts of hidden fat, sodium and many sources of hidden carbohydrates -with good tasting empty calories. As such,

it proves that portion distortion magnifies handheld foods and snacks which also significantly leads to in-between meal snacks as unnecessary calorie intake. It is fair to conclude that typical "modern on-the-go diets" are a train wreck with far too much sugar, salt, and fats.

Whenever possible, people should eat foods in their most natural form. That is probably the best way to avoid excessive sodium, fat and added sugar intake, while increasing the chances of eating enough calcium, vitamin D, potassium, and fiber. This simply means that one should eat eggs, wholegrain toast, plain yogurt, and fruit for breakfast, instead of sugary cereal or a plain bagel with cream cheese. It also means eating unsalted nuts and dried fruits instead of chips, candy, and high-calorie soft drinks.

Children Lifestyle Cycle Adjustments

An increasing number of children are skipping meals and replacing them with snacks. For many, the



day starts by snacking while on the way to school instead of enjoying a wholesome breakfast. If not properly managed, snacking can be considered a form of malnutrition. Skipping major meals with a higher nutrient content can not only affect children’s ability to learn but also their physical development to its full potential, as well as cause behavioral problems. Research suggests that a diet high in sugars, and processed food in early childhood may lower the IQ, while a wholesome balanced diet -such as wholegrain, fruits, vegetables and premium protein sources -including animal protein selections - may do the opposite.

Sugar Rush

Although cereals are not the top source of hidden added sugars in a diet, people can still load up on sugar at breakfast time. This is especially true for children who are not satisfied with a single serving; thus, their big appetites often result in half or more of the daily sugar intake well before the

day has begun. Products that top the list of added sugars are soft drinks like cola, fruit drinks, breakfast cereals, foamed dairy desserts, cakes, and candies. Fruits can enhance low-sugar cereals to compensate for sweetness without adding empty calories. After many years of total inactivity, major cereal makers are finally rolling out less-sugary versions of their breakfast choices. However, more drastic sugar cuts need to follow.

It is questionable if the industry’s attempt to self-regulate the advertising of food and beverages is effective and successful when it comes to promoting healthy nutrition. Marketing directed especially at children usually focuses on less-nutritional foods. The younger generations are vulnerable to social media exposure, which tout foods and beverages high in sugars, fats, and sodium. Social media has brought a totally new dynamic into the food business and is not only a great tool for dealing with crucial consumer feedback, but -unfortunately- also

in manipulating or indoctrinating thought processes. However, make no mistake: taste and flavor and convenience remain key to consumer acceptance and will routinely be the primary criteria for food purchases. Unfortunately, for a big part of society, health considerations are only an afterthought.

About the author:



Henk Hoogenkamp

Former President DMV USA (a Friesland Campina company),
Senior Director Strategic Technology Dupont Protein.
Board member,
Author and Publicist