

HEART OF THE MATTER

What Makes Us Fat?

So much has been written about obesity and the "obesity epidemic" recently that the subject has become a bit tired. The simple indulgence of ordering an ice cream cone in the summertime can be embarrassing if you ask for a single dip. The young teenager over the counter often shows a face of disbelief if you are not willing to take the other two scoops that you paid for and deserve.

The epidemic nature of obesity has been reinforced by the observations that it is communicable. Investigators at the Framingham Heart Study, Dr. Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler, Ph.D., suggest that to prevent obesity, we should choose our friends carefully, even if they are halfway across the country (N. Engl. J. Med. 2007;357:370-9). My mother told me a long time ago that I should be careful about the friends I go around with, but she wasn't exactly talking about their eating habits.

The authors of this intriguing study indicate that we should stay away from fat friends, and if we insist on maintaining these friendships, we should be aware of how much we eat. From their observations it appears that our attainment of obesity is related to our social networks

that supersede family or other environmental experiences.

They also indicate that the spread of obesity through these networks occurs in a quantifiable pattern. The presence of obesity in a mutual friend increases the development of obesity in an individual by 171%. However, if the friendship was not a mutual one (e.g., a one-way friendship), then the obesity of the other member of the friendship did not affect the individual at risk. It appears that the depth of the one-way friendship determined the degree to which an individual was infected and affected by the obesity "virus."

Of course, there are other ways to become obese. We go through our daily activities unaware of a number of signals sent out by marketers that also have an effect on how often and how much we eat.

Recent research has examined several aspects of market-driven inducements to overeat. One way this occurs is by labeling. Brian Wansink, Ph.D., of the applied economics and marketing department at Cornell University, New York, and his colleagues suggest that "low-fat" labeling actually increases food intake "by increasing perception of the appropriate serving size

and decreasing consumptions of guilt" (J. Mark. Res. 2006;43:605-17).

Dr. Wansink and colleagues observed that when subjects were offered the same granola and M&M's labeled "regular" and "low-fat," subjects ate more of the "low-fat" foods than the "regular" food, presuming that the "low-fat" label gave them the license to eat more. In addition, the authors observed that "serving-size (e.g., 'Contains 2 servings') reduces overeating only among guilt-prone normal weight consumers but not among overweight consumers."

The shape of the vessel in which food is offered also can affect its intake. Tall glasses are perceived to have smaller quantities of fluid than short, fat glass even though they contain the same amount of fluid. Therefore, an individual will drink more of the former than the latter.

When individuals were offered a free bottle of the same red wine labeled either California vintage or North Dakota vintage, those who were served the California vintage tended to not only drink more, but eat more, and linger over dinner longer, presuming that the wine was much better and the dinner should be savored longer and in larger quantities ("Mindless Eating, Why We Eat More Than We Think" New York: Bantam Books, 2006).

All of these messages may affect our choice and amount of food eaten when

we sit down for dinner. Everything from the depth and mutuality of social contacts, to the shape of the glass that we drink from, to the labeling of food can affect our eating habits.

Perhaps the best advice to guard against obesity comes from Orson Welles, the ultimate example of morbid obesity, who was quoted as saying, "My doctor told me to stop having intimate dinners for four. Unless there are three other people." Not so subtle advice like this could do a lot to reduce the avoidable obesity of Americans. ■

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BY SIDNEY GOLDSTEIN, M.D.

LETTERS

Letters in response to articles in *CARDIOLOGY NEWS* and its supplements should include your name and address, affiliation, and conflicts of interest in regard to the topic discussed. Letters may be edited for space and clarity.

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