That Other Thing Making Us Fat

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Newsflash: Food isn't the only thing making us fat! To food and health personalities like Mark Bittman, Katie Couric and Michael Pollan preaching against typical eating habits: I hear you. *But it's not just the food*.

Allow me to indulge myself with an anecdote related to obesity. I grew up on a farm. So did my father, his father and my great-grandfather. They got up before the sun every day to milk cows by hand. Then they did it again in the evening. My great-grandfather drove mules to plow, plant and harvest crops on dozens of acres of land each year. My great-grandmother raised chickens and a garden for fresh vegetables. Somewhere along the line, indoor plumbing and electricity came along. And now machines do much of the back-breaking work on farms and in day-to-day life. But a few generations later, my family generally eats the same as they did when manual labor was the easiest sort to come by. And it's not just *my* family.

Technology and urbanization aren't the only things changing the way we live (and die [1]) in developed economies. Take this unpopular sentence: The price of food in the United States is relatively cheap compared to the rest of the world [2]. Americans spend less than 10 percent of our incomes on food. In Japan, that spending level falls in the high teens. *The Economist* postulates that, as countries develop, citizens there spend proportionately less on food. We've also seen that obesity tends to climb in more developed countries. Let's not kid ourselves: Americans like things cheap. So we buy more food. Human bodies are designed to seek out the most energetically rewarding things to eat. So we eat fat and sugar because it makes us feel good.

In a recent column, long-time *New York Times* food spokesperson Mark Bittman

says that sugar and processed foods are causing weight gain [3]. These energy sources alone are not the only nefarious influences plaguing the bodies of citizens of developed countries.

By and large, these citizens — Americans included — generally spend the majority of their waking hours in front of computers. It's unhealthy for our bodies [4] and throws our natural energy cycles off. We drink excessive amounts of caffeine to stay awake and motivated in the sitting position, which stresses our adrenal glands and taxes the quality of our sleep. That makes many people so tired that when they're done sitting at a desk, all they have energy to do is to go home and relax in front of the computer or TV. *The Washington Post* says all of this sitting leads to organ damage, muscle degeneration, foggy brains and bad backs. I can surely attest to that last symptom. Americans also typically have fewer vacation days and use fewer sick days [5]. That's more time we're soaking up screen time and fluorescent lighting in our offices with windows that can't open to let in fresh air.

I imagine you're reading this sitting at your desk, a similar place to where I'm writing it. Or perhaps riding on public transportation. So why don't you take another quick trip with me?

I recently spent five days camping in the lush and rocky state and national parks west of Denver. Aside from several hikes that lasted as long as I usually occupy my desk chair, I had to walk to a water pump and exert more energy than turning on the tap to get H20. I gathered kindling and helped build a fire at night. I hiked all day, like humans were generally designed for. I barely looked at my phone, let alone a computer screen. I probably lost a few pounds in the process and I felt great besides. I was in the sun and the fresh air, the way nature intended. I have yet to see any research on the influence of fluorescent lights and central air on obesity.

We don't need a war on "Big Food" to lower obesity rates in the U.S. We need to reevaluate our lifestyles as a culture. The warlike option is the easier one, which is why Katie Couric's recent documentary "Fed Up [6]" places the blame for obesity on food manufacturers [7]. In addition to bowing to consumer demand for more natural [8] and organic foods, the industry needs to stick up for itself and point a finger at how Americans live instead of just what they eat.

Overeating unhealthy food isn't helping, but it's also not the one-and-only culprit in the U.S. and global obesity epidemic. It's our current lifestyle in the industrialized world and the fact that our bodies evolved to survive the wilds of nature, but we now use them, generally, to sit in buildings. That other thing making us fat is how we live.

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