

OBESITY AND DAIRY PRODUCTS

Obesity is unquestionably in the public consciousness, and it is definitely becoming bigger. Most American adults, like me, are packing some extra pounds, though we don't consider ourselves obese. Part of our problem is an unprecedented access to high-calorie foods-which are widely available, heavily promoted, relatively low in cost and usually good tasting. We also enjoy conveniences like automatic garage door openers, remote controls for television, comfortable automobiles, drive through windows, riding lawnmowers and relaxing recliners. The world is full of incentives to discourage physical activity. Our tendency to easily gain weight suggests a need for changes in diet, exercise and behavior.

Plumpness is also an issue with the younger generation. It is almost abnormal to be "normal" weight. Though the causes of obesity can be complex, portliness usually occurs when a person eats more calories than the body burns. Poor eating habits and lack of exercise are common reasons for this growing trend among youth. Fewer manual jobs, more computers and television, parents afraid to let their children outside to play without supervision, and easy access to fast foods all contribute to the fattening of America. First lady Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" campaign to combat childhood obesity is an example of an effort to reverse this development.

The National Dairy Council is also involved in a significant way, having recently announced a \$250 million pledge to the "Fuel Up to Play 60" program. Funding from the National Dairy Council comes from check-off dollars provided by America's dairy farmers. This five year commitment to promote healthy eating habits among our nation's youth is meant to piggyback on the National Football League's "Play 60" campaign. The purpose of "Play 60" is to encourage children to get at least 60 minutes of physical activity each day. Two hundred and fifty million dollars is a significant investment from the dairy industry, but one worth making if it can help reverse the obesity crisis in this country.

Three National Football League players, along with NFL commissioner Roger Goodell, recently joined with U. S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack and Tom Gallagher, CEO of Dairy Management, Inc. to kick off the "Fuel Up to Play 60" program. Maurice Jones-Drew, one of the smaller players in the NFL, told a group of New York City middle-school students that he has to eat a healthy diet, including low-fat milk, and lots of cheese in order to compete with the bigger players. There is a growing body of research that suggests dairy products, because of their calcium content, can help people lose weight. That is music to the ears of dairy producers.

The "Fuel Up to Play 60" program encourages students to "fuel up" with nutrient rich foods such as low-fat milk and dairy products, fruits, vegetables and whole grains, and to buy fewer sodas and high-calorie, high-fat snack foods. Equally important is the encouragement to "get up and play" with a minimum of 60 minutes of daily physical activity. More than 60 percent of the nations private and public schools are already enrolled in "Fuel Up to Play 60". The efforts are expected to expand as government, business, communities, and families promote this effort to improve nutrient-rich food choices and elevate the value of daily exercise, thereby leading to healthier lives.

Many people cut back on eating dairy products when trying to lose weight, but that is a mistake according to Dr. Michael Zemel, Professor in the Departments of Nutrition and Medicine at the

University of Tennessee. Zemel's peer-reviewed clinical research shows that consuming low-fat dairy products may actually support weight loss because of calcium's proposed effect on fat metabolism. Data shows that the high calcium content of dairy products helps the body break down stored fat. Zemel has written a book titled "The Calcium Key: The Revolutionary Diet Discovery That Will Help You Lose Weight Faster". Zemel writes that replacing high-calorie foods or beverages with low-fat dairy foods; such as milk, yogurt, and cheese, appears to be one of the best ways to boost calcium intake and support weight loss efforts.

As First Lady Michelle Obama reminds us, obesity is an issue that affects everyone. And all of us-as parents, community leaders, and concerned citizens-can be involved and supportive of efforts to improve the health of our nation. The best place to start is in our individual homes. Dairy farmers are anxious that healthy dairy products become a greater percentage of our family diets.