

## **The Athlete's Kitchen**

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### **Should We Enable Obesity?**

The joke goes like this: *Americans don't need to build bombs. We just need to export all of our junk food and spread obesity to the rest of the world so we all self-destruct together.* Ha-ha-ha. But it's not really funny, is it. It's sad.

While attending the Institute of Coaching's Fifth Annual Conference in Boston along with 700 other health and leadership coaches ([www.InstituteOfCoaching.org](http://www.InstituteOfCoaching.org)), I had the opportunity to listen to public health guru Dr. David Katz spread his health message that we, as a society, need to curb the obesity epidemic. Though you, my readers, are likely fit, I'm sure every one of you has been affected by an overfat relative or friend who is dealing with cancer, heart attack, stroke, and/or diabetes. While they've undoubtedly heard the public health messages to eat cleaner and exercise more, they have not felt motivated to make lifestyle changes. Instead, they are suffering from the so-called diseases of aging that are really diseases of inactivity and overnutrition. They aren't having much fun at the doctors' offices....

According to well-documented research presented by Dr. Katz, if we don't stop the obesity epidemic, an estimated 42% of all Americans will be obese in 18 years. One-third will be diabetic. Our kids will die at a younger age than their parents, and the healthcare system will be bankrupt.

By preventing obesity, we can see stunning benefits. That's why Mayor Michael Bloomberg is working hard to change the obesogenic environment in New York City. The naysayers may be complaining he is taking away a person's right to choose, but he's not taking away soda. NYC is just not enabling that bad choice.

In our modern world, we are victims of our own success. We have engineered out the lifestyle that kept our parents and grandparents fit and strong, including riding bikes to work, walking to school, and hanging laundry outside to dry. We have engineered in processed foods that come in huge portions and taste yummy. No surprise less than 2% of Americans eat the recommend number of fruits and vegetables! How can we motivate people to take better care of themselves? We need to focus on the personal benefits—longer life, less pain, and more fun.

The good news is obesity is strongly linked to behaviors we can control, including the foods we choose to chew and the amount of exercise we get. Granted, other factors also have an impact, including gut microbiota, sleep deprivation, and genetics (and genes can be changed with positive food choices.) So if we will be able to have more fun, let's do it!

According to Dr. Katz, each one of us has a choice to either help solve the obesity problem, or become part of the problem. We need to build a levy to hold back the flood of fattening foods that pervade our environment. We need lots of individuals to contribute a sandbag or two to the levy. For example, smaller-sized soda pop is one sandbag. More activity in school classrooms is another. Healthier choices in vending machines are a third. The NuVal food ranking system is a fourth. (NuVal ranks foods according to healthfulness so that consumers in 1,700 supermarkets across the country can easily compare foods to determine the better loaf of bread, brand of soup, and better choice of any food.)

Employers who encourage their staff to exercise contribute a very effective sandbag and they get a good return on that investment. Not only are their employees healthier and take fewer sick days (think lower healthcare costs), they are happier and more productive. The Cleveland

Clinic's employee wellness program has saved millions of health care dollars. The clinic has made changes in the work environment that has transformed the disease-inducing culture to a culture of wellness with loss of 330,000 pounds in five years.

If you want to take steps to change your work environment, check out [www.cdc.gov/nationalhealthyworksites](http://www.cdc.gov/nationalhealthyworksites). You'll find lots of ideas and toolkits, including how to create a program that encourages people to take the stairs not the elevator, and how to improve vending machine choices. Hospital workers might want to pass along this URL <http://HealthierHospitals.org> to an influential VIP. The goal of the initiative is to enroll at least 2,000 hospitals over the next three years to buy and serve healthier foods.

For your own personal activity program, take a peek at [www.abeforfitness.com](http://www.abeforfitness.com). Activity Bursts Everywhere offers free activity videos that last from 3 to 8 minutes. The videos are organized by setting (office, home, waiting room), body part involved (lower body, upper body), and whether the exercise is performed standing or seated. Pass along the info to your friends and relatives who have "no time" to exercise; they'll lose all excuses for why they cannot get a few more minutes of activity each workday.

Empowering kids to be active is an essential health initiative. If you are a parent or a teacher, check out [www.ABCforfitness.com](http://www.ABCforfitness.com) (Activity Bursts in Classrooms). These fun exercise videos insert educational activity into the curriculum during downtimes when the kids aren't really learning anything (before lunch, end of the school day). Dr. Katz believes the answer to hyperactive kids can be more activity, not more Ritalin.

Not everyone loses weight easily, so Dr. Katz has started a website for frustrated dieters, [www.newlr.com](http://www.newlr.com) (National Exchange for Weight Loss Resistance). This site wants to connect frustrated dieters with researchers so we can find solutions to the "Why can't I lose weight?" problem. Maybe you know someone who can contribute his or her experiences.

While changing the work and school environments is helpful, lasting changes really need to be made at the family level. Kids are a driving force; they have the power to change parents' food and exercise habits. Kids are unlikely to make choices based on health, but rather on pleasure. When they understand that health means more fun, they'll start making the right choices--just like victorious sports teams that win with good nutrition. Unjunk Yourself, a YouTube video for teens (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PLaS0En9Q98>) gets kids (of all ages) to think more about choosing what they chew. Isn't it time for us to all work together to make it cool to fuel well?

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