



BLACK WOMEN'S HEALTH STUDY



INSIDE:

*Working together
to improve the health of
black women*

How BWHS research relates to First Lady Michelle Obama's campaign for healthy eating and against obesity in kids

FIRST LADY MICHELLE OBAMA'S CAMPAIGN

Mark Wilson/Getty Images News/Getty Images



First Lady Michelle Obama has launched “Let’s Move,” a campaign to combat childhood obesity. Her focus is on unhealthy eating habits in kids, but what she says also applies to adults.

In a recent speech, Mrs. Obama said that “childhood obesity rates have tripled over the past three decades and you all know the health consequences, from hypertension to heart disease, cancer to diabetes.” Citing her own experience,

she noted changes in American eating habits: “Oftentimes we had home-cooked meals with reasonable portion sizes—and like it or not, there was always a vegetable on the plate. And fast food was a rare treat... we all had our share of soda, chips, and desserts, but certainly not every day and not at every meal. Portion sizes are two to five times bigger than they used to be and beverage portions have grown as well.”

Mrs. Obama offered up some startling information: “As of 2006, folks were spending about 22 percent of their grocery dollars on sweets, salty snacks, and desserts—that’s compared with a little over 12 percent on fruits and vegetables. All told, we’re eating 31 percent more calories than we were 40 years ago—and that’s including 56 percent more fats and oils and 14 percent more sugars and sweeteners.”

Mrs. Obama described her own problems in doing what is best: “The last thing I had time to do was to stand in a grocery store aisle squinting at ingredients I couldn’t pronounce or figure out whether something was healthy or not. I bought products that were pre-packaged, pre-cut, pre-cooked. It was “pre” because I was looking for anything that was quick and easy to prepare and consume.”

Mrs. Obama has changed how she feeds her family and is working to put pressure on manufacturers to make their products healthier. She says that decisions about what ends up on grocers’ shelves depend on us, too—what we buy and what we demand. Let’s join her in working to promote healthier food and eating habits.

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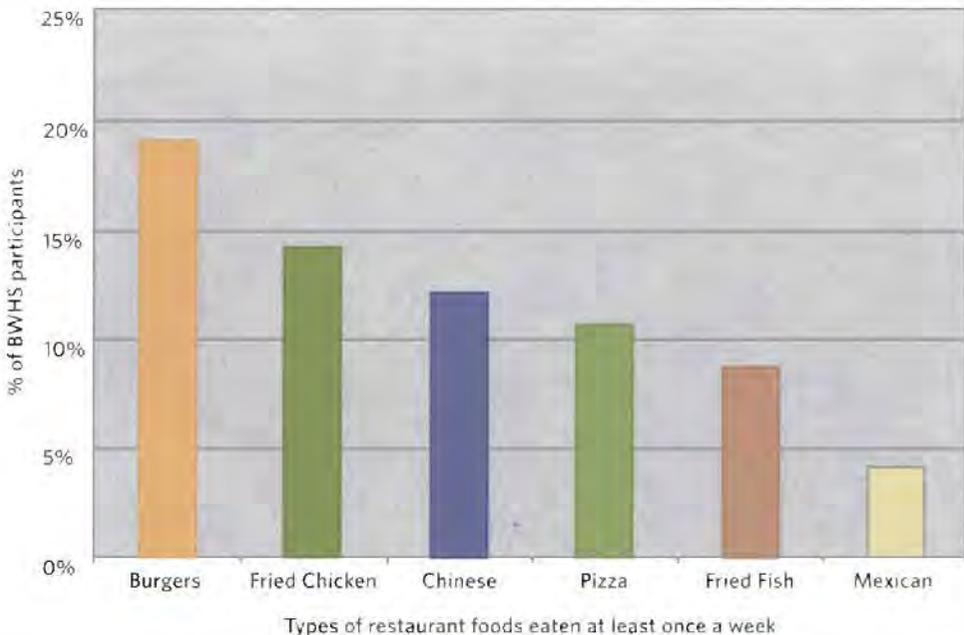
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Some of those extra calories Mrs. Obama notes are the result of people eating restaurant fare more often than before. In 2006, more than 40 percent of the food money Americans spent was on meals consumed away from home, most often obtained from fast food places. Fast food tends to have more calories than food that we prepare ourselves.

Where does the BWHS, a study of adults, fit in? The foods and eating habits that are healthy or unhealthy for adults are also healthy or unhealthy for kids. This newsletter presents some results from BWHS research on eating and health. We hope you will find them

useful in your own life and, if you have kids or grandkids, in theirs as well.

Eating out in the BWHS. You may remember filling out questions on BWHS health surveys about how often you eat food from restaurants. The graph below shows what percentage of participants reported eating each of six different types of restaurant food at least once a week. Burgers and fried chicken were the most popular: 19 percent of women had burgers and 14 percent had fried chicken from restaurants at least once a week. It is likely that many of these meals were from fast food places.



Mrs. Obama noted that Americans are eating more fast food, processed food, and sweetened drinks—and fewer vegetables than in the past. Some BWHS results on the health effects of these foods:

Cereal fiber BWHS participants who ate the most cereal fiber (the type of fiber found in food made from grains like whole wheat, brown rice, and bran) had a 20 percent lower risk of diabetes than women who ate small amounts. A list of some high- and low-fiber foods is below.

(Krishnan et al. "Glycemic index, glycemic load, cereal fiber intake and risk of type 2 diabetes in U.S. black women." *Arch Intern Med* 2007; 167(21):2304-9.)

Glycemic index BWHS participants who frequently ate foods with a high glycemic index (high-carbohydrate

foods that release sugar rapidly) had a higher risk of diabetes, and possibly a higher risk of uterine fibroids. A list of some high- and low-glycemic index foods is below.

(Krishnan et al. "Glycemic index, glycemic load, cereal fiber intake and risk of type 2 diabetes in U.S. black women." *Arch Intern Med* 2007; 167(21):2304-9, Radin et al. "Dietary glycemic index and load in relation to risk of uterine leiomyomata in the Black Women's Health Study." *Am J Clin Nutr* 2010; 91(5):1281-8.)

Restaurant meals BWHS participants who ate 2 or more restaurant meals of burgers a week and or 2 or more restaurant meals of fried chicken a week had about one-and-one-half times the risk of developing diabetes than women who ate none. Increases in diabetes risk were smaller for women who frequently ate Chinese food or fried fish, and there

How foods measure up in terms of their cereal fiber and glycemic index
(Aim for high cereal fiber and low glycemic index: Stay in the green)

High Cereal Fiber

fiber and bran cereals
oatmeal
whole wheat breads
whole wheat pasta

peanuts
most vegetables
black-eyed peas
red kidney beans
apples

Low Glycemic Index

Low Cereal Fiber

corn and rice cereals
white bread

rice
white bread
white potatoes
jelly beans
sweetened fruit drinks or soft drinks

High Glycemic Index



were no increases in risk from eating Mexican food or pizza.

(Krishnan et al. "Consumption of restaurant foods and incidence of type 2 diabetes in African American women." *Am J Clin Nutr* 2010;91:465-71.)

Vegetables A dietary pattern that is high in whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and fish was associated with reduced risk of breast cancer. Analyses in progress right now indicate that the foods most responsible for the reduction in breast cancer risk are vegetables.

(Agurs-Collins et al. "Dietary patterns and breast cancer risk in women participating in the Black Women's Health Study." *Am J Clin Nutr* 2009; 90(3):621-8.)

Sugar-sweetened drinks Diabetes occurred more often in BWHS participants who drank 2 or more sweetened soft drinks or sweetened fruit drinks a day than in women who infrequently drank these beverages.

(Palmer et al. "Sugar-sweetened beverages and incidence of type 2 diabetes mellitus in African American women." *Arch Intern Med* 2008; 168(14):1487-92.)

Other Notes about Food

Unhealthy foods may be cheaper and healthy foods may be harder to find. The U.S. government makes some foods cheaper by giving money (price supports) to the growers, but these foods may not be particularly healthy. For example, corn is supported, which makes corn products inexpensive. Because it is cheap to get high-fructose corn syrup from corn, this sweetener is added to many processed foods. Adding corn syrup may make foods taste better, but it fills them with empty calories.

There are some places in the U.S. called "food deserts" where fresh foods are unavailable—either there are no food stores at all, or the food stores that are there do not carry fresh foods. These food deserts are in low-income areas. Mrs. Obama is working to increase awareness of this problem and overcome it.



BWHS participant "RC" sent us her views about eating and food. She thinks the main reason for obesity is the food being sold to Americans: "Why aren't we questioning the ingredients and source of everything we put in our mouths? I know someone who is fixated on sodium content and sugar. So, she reads the nutrition facts on boxes of things that my grandma wouldn't even recognize as food. She reads the sodium content and ignores the ingredients. She buys fat- and sugar-free, not realizing that the real food has been replaced with a chemical."

These are important points. Many of the processed foods that we eat today would *not* be recognized by our grandmothers as food. Many of the ingredients in processed foods are preservatives or put there to make the food look nicer, not because they are healthy. And labels are often misleading—a manufacturer might brag about the "low fat" content of a product that is high in added sugar and salt.

RC included a list of questions that she would ask her sister participants:

Do you eat a green leafy vegetable every day?

Do you generally cook your meals at home?

Is there a bowl of fruit on your kitchen table?

How much water do you drink?

Are most of your meals from pre-packaged foods?

If your answers are yes, yes, yes, a lot, and no, then you are doing some very good things for your health. In line with what Mrs. Obama said about how our food money is spent, cutting down on purchases of sweets, salty snacks, and desserts—and increasing purchases of fruits and vegetables—would be a good thing.

Tell us about ways that you have found to improve what you eat. You can reach us by email at bwhs@bu.edu or by calling us toll-free at 1-800-786-0814.



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Why are there questions about hair products?

A number of participants wrote or called to ask why there are questions about hair products (creams, oils, root stimulators) on the 2009 health survey. The answer is simple—these products are so commonly used by black women that we felt it was important to use the power of the BWHS to study them. We will classify the products reported according to what chemicals they contain and then examine whether they are linked to various health outcomes. You may remember that we collected information on hair relaxer use—there was little reason to believe that these products had adverse effects on health, but on the other hand, there had been almost no study of their health effects. We found no relation between hair relaxer use, even over many years, with risk of breast cancer or preterm birth, thus offering reassurance to women who use these products.

Thank you

As can be seen from results presented in this newsletter, the BWHS provides important health information for black women. With each year that passes, the BWHS is increasingly able to answer a range of important health questions because we have collected more information on more factors and on more cases of illness.

Many thanks to you for participating.



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