Processed and artificial foods may increase risk of obesity

So why is it that when people from other countries move to America, or when American influence overtakes traditional cultures, the result, inevitably, is ill-health? The answer is simple: food. Americans treat food as a source of immediate gratification. We want it tasty, we want it cheap and we want it now. To meet this demand, American manufacturers pump their food full of sugar, salt, hydrogenated oils, saturated fats, preservatives, dyes, artificial flavors, and a host of bizarre, unpronounceable chemicals that, if you saw them in their pre-processed state, you would never consider putting in your mouth. Our food is almost unrecognizable as food. These additives and preservatives often replace all the nutrients and fiber that is removed from the original food source. So while processed food might taste good, it essentially lacks all the beneficial nutrients needed to nourish the body, maintain blood sugar levels, and ensure proper digestion. In addition, the chemicals and synthetic ingredients found in many processed foods are foreign to the body. The body stores anything that the digestive organs can't process, most often in fat tissue.[9] Scientists have considered that this process may also contribute to the development of obesity. Calories that have no nutritional value - such as those found in sugary soda and many fried foods - are called "empty calories." Empty calorie foods are quickly broken down, causing blood sugar levels to spike. As a result, the body secretes insulin which leads to hunger signals, so you eat more at your next meal. Researchers suggest that these types of foods - highly refined, processed, and starchy - may be a contributing factor to our obesity epidemic. Another factor in gaining or losing weight is the quality of the food you eat rather than how much you consume. According to a June 23, 2011 report published in the New England Journal of Medicine, participants gained weight with the intake of potato chips, potatoes, sweetened beverages,

unprocessed red meats and processed meats. They lost weight with the intake of vegetables, whole grains, fruits, nuts, and yogurt.[10] It's another nail in the coffin of fast foods.

Fast-food is costing us our health and our money

Fast-food joints have not only come to dominate the American landscape, they are also the most visible American export around the globe. Unfortunately, fast food contains almost no nutrients and is loaded with added salt, sugar, refined flours, fat, and preservatives. The irony is that for every dollar we spend on fast food, and every second we save at a drive-through, over a lifetime we put ourselves at serious risk. These risks include huge, direct medical costs and the indirect impact of productivity losses due to illness and premature death associated with diet-related illnesses linked to a meat-based diet that includes highly processed foods laden with fats and artificial ingredients.

So what’s the solution?

Leading health experts agree that eating a wholesome plant-based diet is the single-best thing we can do to protect our health. A vegetarian diet that includes plenty of whole grains, legumes, fruits, nuts, seeds and vegetables supports a lifetime of good health. In particular, it may provide protection against disease, including our nation's three biggest killers: heart disease, cancer, and strokes. Eating a well rounded, plant-based diet also helps treat and reverse obesity, diabetes and a host of other ailments. The 2010 USDA Report on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans states, “On average, vegetarians consume fewer calories from fat than non-vegetarians, particularly saturated fat, and have a higher consumption of carbohydrates than non-vegetarians. In addition, vegetarians tend to consume fewer overall calories and have a lower body mass index than non-vegetarians. These characteristics, in

addition to the dietary pattern per se, may contribute to the improved health outcomes of vegetarians."[11]

Organic and natural alternatives to processed and artificial ingredients

Protect your health and the health of your family by choosing organically grown produce, and products made with organic ingredients, as often as possible. Organic food is grown without using most conventional pesticides, synthetic fertilizers or sewage sludge. Ionizing radiation and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are also not found in organic foods. At the very least, seek out organic alternatives to the fruits and vegetables that are mostly heavily treated with pesticides. For a good source of information on which foods to always buy organic, see "the dirty dozen." The next step is to choose prepared foods that are free of artificial sweeteners, flavors, additives, colorings, and have minimal preservatives. When it comes to ingredient labels, a simple rule of thumb is that if you cannot pronounce it or have only seen it in chemistry class, don't eat it!

Groundbreaking research on obesity

The work of Dr. Dean Ornish and Hawaii's own Dr. Terry Shintani reveals a startling and encouraging conclusion: obesity is not a result of eating too much food. Rather, obesity and other chronic health conditions result from eating too little *real* food.[12, 13] Real food means whole grains and unprocessed vegetables, fruits, legumes, nuts and seeds. These foods are nutrient-dense, packed with vitamins, minerals, enzymes, and

fiber. Real food or whole food requires more time to digest, so your stomach stays full, and you feel satisfied longer. Thus, you eat less at your next meal. As a bonus, whole, plant-based foods are naturally aromatic and uniquely tasty, so they fill you up and satisfy you without added artificial ingredients. The studies conducted by Dr. Ornish and Dr. Shintani demonstrate that the most important tool for success in any diet is not restricting calories, but choosing those calories wisely. In his book “Eat More, Weigh Less,” Dr. Ornish explains that a person can eat high-fiber, low-fat foods until they feel full without fear of gaining weight. In fact, this diet, coupled with a moderate exercise regimen, may help a person lose weight without ever having to go hungry. Both Dr. Ornish and Dr. Shintani recommend a wholesome plant-based diet comprised primarily of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and legumes.

Healthy lifestyle pays off

These days, it’s not unusual to see lists of ingredients that are longer than the ad copy. Even a simple loaf of bread is loaded with sugar, packed with preservatives, and masked with flavorings produced in a laboratory. It would take an investigative journalist to uncover the origins of most of these chemicals disguised as food. These artificial ingredients and preservatives allow food manufacturers to lower their costs and provide food with traits they would not have naturally. Artificial ingredients and preservatives may enhance color, extend shelf life, make foods faster or easier to process at the manufacturing stage or make them quicker to prepare at home. However, these chemicals can accumulate in our bodies over time, adversely affecting our health. The reality is that no one saves time or money by buying fast- or highly processed food that undermines their health. Instead, they increase the likelihood that they will have to pay later for expensive health care as the effects of these "food additives" and fast foods take their toll on the body[14]. By adopting a healthy lifestyle based on organic and natural foods and a vegetarian diet, coupled with regular exercising, you make an investment that will pay healthy dividends for the rest of your life.