

“Healthy” Chemicals

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It’s a Sunday morning, and the local grocery store is buzzing with the post-church rush of power-walking mothers juggling children, coffee, coupons, and grocery lists. We proceed through the stop-and-go traffic of shoppers lost in the familiar thought of “what do I want to eat this week?” We browse the various food items that line the shelves and freezers, evaluating and comparing them, attempting to fight the frequently losing battle between what we want to eat and what we should eat. The Hostess pastries and DiGiorno frozen pizza mock us as we remind ourselves of the low-carb diet we are starting this week. We desperately search for a solution, a happy medium in which we can indulge without the guilt.

Ah-ha: diet foods! We scan the packages looking for the golden words: “low-fat,” “low-calorie,” “sugar-free,” and within moments our cart is filled with 100-calorie packs and Lean Cuisines. We feel relieved, satisfied, and proud. Who said dieting was hard? Those ten pounds will be off in no time. I will feel thin and confident. I will feel healthy. I will *be* healthy, right?

There’s some sort of irony in most “diet” products. Most of us are aware of the foods that are loaded with sugar, calories, and fat. We know they are unhealthy for us and consciously try to avoid them. However, as soon as the word “diet” or “100 calories” becomes associated with the same product, all negativity is lifted. We no longer feel guilty for indulging. Although we may be consuming the same ingredients, we are consuming less. Therefore, why would you choose a medium-sized one-hundred calorie apple when you can eat the equivalent in a small packaged bag of mini-Oreos? We are Americans and we are consumers. We believe what we see and are compelled to follow the newest “diet” craze that our celebrity- and media-centered

society thrives upon. Therefore, if we find something claiming to be “diet” and having fewer calories per package, by all means we’ll have our cake and eat it too.

Why are we so apt to follow the new diet trends? The reason is mainly rooted behind what we value in society today. We live in a society where body image, including our perception of self and others, reflects us as individuals, and therefore weight becomes a primary concern. We have learned to value ourselves in terms of weight and the way we look because how we are perceived by others is important in society. When we are overweight, we are viewed as unhealthy. This perception then correlates to a negative view in various other aspects of our lives, specifically personality. Overweight individuals are often regarded as “less conscientious, less agreeable, less emotionally stable, and less extraverted than their ‘normal-weight’ counterparts.” As a result, weight discrimination is present at various levels of the employment cycle, including “selection, placement, compensation, promotion, discipline, training, and discharge” (Roehling, Roehling, and Odland 392). When you are thin in society, you are often at a much greater advantage. This has created the obsession over weight, dieting, and living a *healthier* lifestyle. We therefore become desperate and willing to consume whatever guarantees weight loss, with little concern for the possible consequences of doing so.

The problem created is a generalized misconception in which health is viewed entirely externally. Often there is a correlation between body weight and health; however, when we rely too heavily on our weight as an indication of health, we fail to show equal concern for our internal health. In being too focused on restricting or completely ridding our diet of fat, calories, and sugar, we turn a blind eye to what we are actually consuming. The overly critical nature of today’s society has created a weight obsession that has fueled the market of deceptively hazardous “diet” products, which overshadow the importance of whole-foods in maintaining a

healthy body. Greater consideration should be given to evaluating the food we eat because often what we deem “healthy” is not so healthy after all.

Perhaps the most deceptive marketing ploy is the use of labels such as “fat-free,” “low-carb,” and “diet” on common food products. As consumers, we are attracted to such claims and tend to automatically assume the products are healthier without double-checking the label and ingredients. These claims can be misleading because while many products may be reduced in grams of fat or carbs, their benefits are countered by the “healthy” chemicals elsewhere. Most diet products on the market are prepackaged, frozen, or canned. This is an immediate red flag for added preservatives such as monosodium glutamate (MSG). While MSG is used to enhance the taste of food, it has been linked to weight gain, chest pain, increased heartbeat, and headache (“MSG Lurks” 10). Even products that claim to be “MSG free” may contain other forms of nearly the same chemical such as autolyzed yeast and disodium guaylonlate (“When Diet Food”).

Sodium is the other most common hidden health hazard in canned foods and many other processed foods. Items such as soups can contain more than an entire daily recommended amount. While consuming a moderate amount of sodium in a diet is beneficial to your health, an excess can lead to high cholesterol, hypertension, and an increased risk of heart attack (National Institutes of Health). Because these effects result from a gradual build-up in your body, they may not be noticeable, and thus we may not see them as an immediate cause for concern. However, the reality is much different and very severe. Your body becomes a ticking time bomb, and when we wait for symptoms to emerge before we address a dietary change, it’s often too late.

Even when we take a quick glance at the food label, we may not be seeing the entire picture. This is often the case for products that contain zero calories such as diet sodas.

Essentially these drinks, although with minimal to no calories, contain chemicals and other acids that can be harmful to the body. The no-calorie artificial sweeteners used in such drinks are deceiving because they trick our bodies into acquiring a taste for the much sweeter substitute. These compounds make us crave other extremely sweet foods that are often higher in calorie count (Chan). Recent studies have also suggested a link between frequent consumption of diet soda and increased incidence of stroke, heart attack, and other blood vessel diseases (“Daily Diet Soda”).

Beyond the possible health risks, some argue that the revolution of diet products is helpful in combating the rising obesity epidemic in our country. Such advocates believe it promotes awareness and helps control calorie and fat consumption in our daily diets. I agree; it is no myth that a low-calorie intake can aid in weight loss. We should all be conscious to some extent of not overindulging in what we eat. However, ridding your diet of certain nutrients and restricting yourself to miniscule proportions is not only unhealthy, but can backfire on your weight-management efforts. As previously stated, the additive MSG in prepackaged foods is used specifically to increase flavor. Therefore, you’re not only getting a smaller proportion, but you are left with the desire to consume more. While diet foods that encourage healthy control of proportions are not the root of all evil, continuously depriving our bodies of essential nutrients in favor of these perceived “healthy” chemicals is of lesser benefit.

Overall internal and external body health is maintained through a balanced diet of essential food groups and nutrients. These nutrients are mainly found in our fruits, vegetables, grains, protein, and dairy food groups. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, half of what we eat should be fruits and vegetables, and the remaining should be divided between whole grains, protein, and dairy (“Food Groups Overview”). Simply making the

extra effort to prepare your own meals and concentrating on using an array of natural ingredients can have profound impacts on your overall health. Although homemade meals may be greater in calorie count, you obtain all the nutrients that are often lost in prepackaged meals, and you additionally don't have to be wary of hidden ingredients.

For instance, let's compare a typical prepackaged Lean Cuisine, Grilled Chicken and Penne Pasta, to its homemade counterpart. This twelve-ounce meal contains 340 calories, 5 grams of fat, 500 milligrams of sodium, and 50 grams of carbohydrates. While the package description of "white meat chicken, penne pasta, and vegetables in a garlic herb sauce," seems simplistic, the eighty-four item ingredient list tells a different story ("Lean Cuisine"). Now, if you were to cook the homemade equivalent with $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of whole wheat pasta, 4 ounces of chicken breast, 3 ounces of broccoli, and 1 ounce of carrots and garlic, this sixteen-ounce meal would contain approximately 550 calories, 1.5 grams of fat, 132 milligrams of sodium, and 49 grams of carbohydrates ("Nutrition Facts"). While there's an increase in caloric intake, there's a significant decrease in fat, sodium, and carbohydrates. Most importantly, the ingredient list plummets from eighty-four to five. Not only is the homemade meal larger and thus more filling, but it's all natural and more nutritious. It's more beneficial to your health to balance your diet with whole-foods within all main food groups in an appropriately portioned manner rather than to entirely restrict your food intake. The fats, carbohydrates, and sugars you need are found in whole-foods and naturally grown products, none of which contain excess preservatives or questionable ingredient lists.

While it's easy to recognize the problem in our diets, we often have trouble addressing the issue and implementing change. Some believe natural foods are too expensive or time-consuming to prepare meals with. However, we need to question our values and prioritize our

health. As a result of the extreme importance placed on body image in today's society, we have become obsessed with weight and dieting, which has distorted the meaning of health. The health of an individual cannot be reflected entirely externally. In evaluating our overall health, the most critical aspect is our internal well-being, regulated through what we eat. Essentially, we are damaging ourselves because we have become more concerned about reaching a short-term ideal body image instead of long-term health. What we believe to be healthy dieting is actually poisoning us. Consuming reduced-fat packaged chemicals may be your fastest route to weight-loss and your one-way ticket to a slew of future health problems.

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