Excessive sugar is harming Americans, and feds share some of the blame

Richard Jacoby and Raquel Baldeolomar

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration recently proposed including “added sugars” on the Nutrition Facts labels of packaged foods. It’s a step in the right direction but falls woefully short of the steps the FDA and U.S. Department of Agriculture — the agencies responsible for oversight of our nation’s public health and nutrition — should have taken years ago.

The fact of the matter is Americans are overweight and sick, and the reason is excess sugar.

Over the past few years, mounting evidence has shown that sugar is chronically toxic. Sugar has been linked to a multitude of diseases, including cancer, obesity, diabetes and Alzheimer’s disease. There is also emerging research that sugar is highly addictive, potentially even more addictive than drugs like cocaine.

We recently wrote a book called, “Sugar Crush,” that outlines our own research and experience with excess sugar’s toxic effects.

Yet today, 80 percent of our nation’s packaged foods contain added sugars, which leads the average American to consume about 22 teaspoons of added sugar every day.

Despite these facts, and the mounting evidence showing excess sugar’s negative impact, the FDA and USDA have done little to make any significant changes to dietary guidelines that would help shift this trajectory.

The ugly truth is that the interests of the Big Sugar and Big Ag lobby have influenced the FDA’s nutritional guidelines and the USDA’s food pyramid for decades. One of the most notable examples of this influence is seen in the original Food Guide Pyramid adopted in 1992.

Luis Light, former USDA director of dietary guidance, led a group of nutritionists tasked with developing an eating guide that later became known as the Food Guide Pyramid. Light wrote that she was shocked when she saw the revised version of the food guide.

“It was vastly different from the one we had developed,” she notes. “Our recommendation of 3-4 daily servings of whole-grain breads and cereals was changed to a whopping 6-11 servings forming the base of the Food Pyramid as a concession to the processed wheat and corn industries.”

Sadly, Americans are the ones who have paid the price for the FDA’s and USDA’s shortcomings. From 1980 to 2011, the number of Americans with diagnosed diabetes has more than tripled, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; and over the past 35 years, adult obesity rates have more than doubled while childhood obesity rates have more than tripled.

The bottom line is Americans have been educated into ignorance, and the FDA and USDA have failed. Moving forward, the FDA and USDA have a choice to stay the course, which is making Americans fatter and sicker, or shift directions to start improving our nation’s health.

A first step would be ensuring a better Nutrition Facts label that includes “added sugars,” as well as other changes like adjusting the serving size to be more realistic.

A second step would be to adopt front-of-package labels to help consumers make healthy choices more quickly.

Lastly, there needs to be higher standards and better oversight of the health-related claims food manufacturers print on packaging, such as “high in vitamin A,” without acknowledging their minuses such as high sugar content.

The sugar industry is already opposing the FDA’s proposal, citing the lack of science to justify “added sugars” labeling. Let’s hope that the FDA and USDA can start prioritizing Americans’ health above self-serving politics.

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