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What *Really* is Junk Food?

Dr. Phil Maffetone

If you have to ask, you're probably eating it. Even small amounts can contribute to a body's harm and pathology—no, not just emotionally, but physiologically. In fact, eat some junk food that has zero fat, and 50 percent of it can turn to stored body fat. And as most people know, junk food is a primary cause of the worldwide overfat epidemic that's affecting the full spectrum of individuals, from the poor to the most serious athletes.

In addition to its contribution to increased body fat, junk food may be the number one cause of the most common diseases, including cancer, diabetes, Alzheimer's and heart disease, not to mention the problems that significantly contribute to low quality of life such as intestinal conditions, hormone imbalance, chronic inflammation, fatigue, and much more (even hair loss). For this reason, some health authorities want to refer to junk food as pathogenic food. But that won't happen soon enough thanks to the ongoing multi-million-dollar marketing campaigns waged by the food industry—the image of these bad foods is now being portrayed as harmless rather than the poison it really is.

However, pathologic food better refers to its capability to cause pathological conditions, including those with excess body fat.

In all its many disguises—it's amazing how easy it is to fool even the very careful consumer—junk food, including soda, chips, candy, is one of the world's most successful business ventures. Large amounts of it are in almost all Western households, and in the East as well, including China, Japan and Southeast Asia. It's even widespread in the Third World, where in only one generation, millions of starving people have now become overfat, thanks to junk food.

It's widely believed that the phrase *junk food* was coined in 1972 by Michael Jacobson, director of the American Center for Science in the Public Interest (a consumer advocacy organization that focuses on health and nutrition). But defining junk food has been a difficult task, partly because the numbers of items are alarmingly high, and also because the food landscape is always changing with new and improved products coming and going almost daily.

In defining junk food, the worst ones are most obvious—chips and cookies, coke and colas, and other sugared liquids, candy, and most other snacks. The biggest offenders are sugar (including sucrose, white table sugar, and others such as high fructose corn syrups) and flour, and the thousands of products made from these two deadly ingredients (from ketchup and mayonnaise to

energy bars and sports products, and almost all liquid refreshments).

For those on the go, junk food is synonymous with fast food, and includes almost all burgers, fries, pizza, fried chicken and foods that are battered or coated or have sauces. Included are the popular "salads," such as tuna and chicken salad, and even those low-cal dressings. Most international foods are not exempt from the junk food category: Chinese food (high in sugar, starch and or flour), sushi (white rice with added sugar), sweetened teriyaki foods, deep fried fish and chips, and others.

Going to a deli for lunch? The popular ham and American cheese on a roll is all junk food. As is that pasta salad with crackers (almost all pasta, noodles and similar items are junk). Of course, a plain bagel and diet coke is all junk food too. Instead, have some leaf lettuce with tomatoes, red peppers, carrots and slices of real roast beef or Swiss cheese. Hold the mayo and ketchup, but mustard (after reading the ingredients) or olive oil and vinegar would be OK.

As you push a shopping cart down the food store aisle, it's almost guaranteed that if the food is in a can, frozen, or wrapped in a package, it's probably junk food. Consider a can of peaches, which may seem healthy—but most are packed with high amounts of sugar. Instead, buy fresh fruit in season. Even most trendy bulk foods found in health stores and other retailers, with their funky image of pure and natural, is junk food too.

It's not only conventional foods available to consumers everywhere, but most organic items are junk too (see, "[Shopping at Whole Foods](#)"). In fact, organic junk food is one of the fastest growing segments of the natural foods industry.

It's simple—there are two kinds of foods:

- **Healthy food.** It's real, naturally occurring, unadulterated and unprocessed, and nutrient-rich. If you can grow or raise it, it's real. Included are fresh fruits and vegetables, lentils and beans, eggs, real cheese (see, "[Milk proteins: The Good and the Bad](#)"), whole pieces of meat (such as fish, beef, chicken), nuts, seeds, and similar items. Consuming these foods provide a great potential for both immediate and long-term health benefits.

- **Junk food** is everything else. It's deceptively inexpensive to buy and unhealthy to eat. These items are processed, manufactured, have added chemicals, sugars and other unhealthy ingredients that can immediately, and long term, adversely affect health. Unhealthy versions of healthy foods noted above include canned fruit in sugar-syrup, processed vegetables (canned, frozen or from fast food outlets) with sugar, flour or chemicals, baked beans in a sugar and flour sauce, powdered and processed eggs with trans fats, processed cheese and cheese spreads, cold cuts (bologna, salami, chicken and turkey loaf, fish sticks), peanut butter (typically containing sugar and trans fat), and roasted nuts (often with ingredients you can't even pronounce). Of course, genetically altered items, which are not allowed in certified organic foods or in many countries of the world, would also be considered junk food.

Can we rely on governments to help us understand what foods are junk and unhealthy? Not as long as the political influence by junk food lobbyists continues. This has resulted in some absurd ideas about food. For example, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the federal department responsible for developing and executing U.S. food policies, does not consider a Snicker's Bar to be junk food. How about chocolate chip cookies, high in white flour and sugar? Not junk food says the USDA. Likewise for French fries, or the American version, and even an ice cream bar containing 320 calories, 12 grams of fat, and 4 teaspoons of sugar.

The USDA won't even address the food quality of school lunches. Their standards for foods and snacks sold out of vending machines, in cafeterias, and other venues only limit the sale of "foods of minimal nutritional value." The junk food industry gets around this issue by adding synthetic vitamins to their products and claim it's nutritious. One problem is that the USDA, which does not address calories, glycemic index or trans fat, developed its standards in the 1970s, when most of today's junk food and knowledge of its health dangers—and marketing tricks—didn't exist.

Most people, including many junk food addicts, would agree that candy bars, cup cakes, colas and similar hardcore unhealthy items are examples of classic junk foods. While this is true, there's a seemingly endless list of foods that many might not realize are unhealthy. with the same or very

...including, unless not obvious, many, might not realize are identical, and the same or very similar nutritional composition. These include almost all breakfast cereals, snack foods, breads, and packaged/prepared foods.

How much junk food causes harm? One bite can be enough for some people, especially those addicted to sugar (see, "[Sugar Addiction: Is it Real?](#)"). Certainly a junk food snack or meal can significantly alter one's physiology in a negative way. This seemingly small amounts of junk can also switch on genes that trigger cancer, heart disease, Alzheimer's, obesity, and other common, preventable conditions.

Among the ways junk-food corporations make their products appear healthy, in addition to advertising, is through the fortification of processed flour. Virtually all this flour is used in prepared and packaged foods, including most baked goods, and what consumers buy for home cooking. In the processing of wheat flour, most vitamins are removed and lost. Food fortification, which exists in over 50 countries around the world, mandates that synthetic vitamins be added to processed flour. There are at least two problems with this: first, it gives companies a way to advertise a junk food product as healthy ("contains 18 vitamins" or "100% of the daily need for folic acid"). Second, the policy of adding synthetic vitamins to one of the most commonly consumed foods in the world—white flour—has scientists concerned. Fortification has been halted in some countries due to, among other things, increased cancer rates from high intakes of folic acid (see, "[The Folate Plot: How governments allow industry to put profits ahead of health—and what you can do](#)").

Of course, vitamins are not the only nutrients removed from processed flour. Others include healthy fats, minerals, fiber and many phytonutrients. And, the great deception of "whole grain" is advertised everywhere—especially on packages of highly processed cereals, crackers and other junk food.

The only truly whole grains that are not junk food are the real thing, wholesome kernels of oats, rice, wheat, rye and others. Of course, most consumers have never seen wheat berries or the raw grains that occur in nature. You know they're real because they are whole pieces of real food that take much longer to cook. For example, oats in this form take 45 minutes or more to prepare. Compare this to junk food oats, which may take one minute to cook, or less as some oatmeal products only require that you add hot water.

Will governments finally participate in reducing or eliminating junk food? I would hope so. For one reason, no country can afford the overfat epidemic and it's associated long list of chronic diseases, and with the reduction of the availability of unhealthy food, a dramatic drop in chronic disease would quickly follow. Not to mention raising quality of life everywhere.

But governments probably will not take this kind of action. Instead, they will rely on taxes. Cost, rather than intelligence or self-responsibility, is widely acknowledged by public health experts to have been the single biggest factor in reducing smoking rates. The same has started to happen with junk food. So far, New York City bans trans fats, Denmark became the first nation in the world to tax sugar, Romania has a new lower value-added tax rate on healthy foods, New Zealand is preparing to raise taxes on foods with little or no nutritional value, and other federal and regional governments are following suit. In addition, in various locations around the world there has been an increase in policies that restrict or ban junk foods in schools, and the same for television advertising during children's shows. (But even in schools where some unhealthy foods are banned, school lunches themselves consist of significant amounts of junk food.)

There is so much junk food in the world, and deception about it, that discussing it thoroughly could fill one or more books. "[The Big Book of Health and Fitness](#)" covers more details of the subject of healthy versus junk food.

Without junk food there are still plenty of delicious snacks, meals and desserts. In case you missed it, the [Recipes! section of the website](#) is the most popular one. As I've discussed many times, eating well means planning ahead and carefully shopping so you always have only healthy food at home, work and during travel. By avoiding junk food I guarantee you'll quickly feel better, be healthier and improve your overall human performance.

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