

Before It's Too Late

By Jae Won Jang
Eastside High School, 11th Grade
Teacher: Sarah Reynierson

There seems to be an unsolvable health epidemic in the 21st century. Cancer rates are increasing at an alarming rate globally. Obesity has become more prevalent in Americans of all incomes, education, and ethnicities. Billions of U.S. dollars are spent each year trying to find the cure – the magic bullet – for these diseases. As finding a cure is a short-term solution to address the problems that already occur, we must instead fix the source of these diseases to prevent, rather than to cure. The origin of these problems lies in the foods we directly consume, and consequently, the food industry.

As it exists today, the U.S. food industry is highly structured and organized. The suppliers, producers, and consumers seek the cheapest investment with maximum gain. Assuming the food industry is a three distinctly tiered relationship, the *suppliers* –those that sell resources that are used to create products– provide the cheapest profitable supplies. The *producers* –those that create products– purchase the cheapest profitable supplies to create their goods. Of these goods, the *consumers* –those that purchase the products– seek the cheapest product with the greatest value. However, some suppliers, through government intervention, disturbance of the laissez-faire principle of supply and demand, and by flooding the market with the cheapest profitable supplies, have sold supplies that have increasingly shown to have dangerous short-term and long-term effects on our health. One supply best illustrates the hazardous correlation between these supplies and our health – high fructose corn syrup.

Starting from 1977, HFCS, as it has become abbreviated, became the cheapest sweetener substitute on the U.S. market through a federal system of sugar tariffs that significantly increased the cost of imported sugar in the United States and kept the price of domestic corn low through government subsidies paid to growers. Since 1995, the federal government has given \$73.8 billion into corn subsidization alone, and has resulted in a cheap, unhealthy, yet popular market of foods. According to Mehmet Oz and Michael Roisen in their book “You: The Owner’s Manual...” they state that HFCS inhibits leptin secretion and doesn’t shut off the hormone ghrelin, so you never get the message that you’re full. In addition, intensive research contrasting the effects of regular sugars versus HFCS on the human body shows that the latter correlates to obesity, diabetes, insulin resistance, pancreatic dysfunction, high cholesterol, heart disease, cancer, high blood pressure, anemia, extensive liver damage, infertility, osteoporosis and osteoarthritis when consumed in large quantities. Interestingly, the start of widespread commercial use of HFCS in 1977 coincides with the skyrocketing rates of obesity in the United States starting about thirty-five years ago, to an extent that now an average of one in four people are obese, affecting Americans of all incomes, education, and ethnicities, particularly people of lower economic status, as they cannot afford healthier foods that have had their costs raised due to government subsidization to certain food industries and synthetic inflation of the prices on foreign crops.

But HFCS is just one small facet of the current health epidemic. The use of unhealthy supplies is widespread and growing: genetically modified organisms, livestock

fed with byproducts, monosodium glutamate, artificial sweeteners, refined sugars, hydrogenated oils, trans fat, refined oils, sodium nitrate and nitrite, and artificial coloring and dyes are all in common ingredients in our foods, each with their health risks. Genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are becoming increasingly pesticide-and-herbicide resistant after each consecutive harvest, consequently hurting the environment and the consumer's health; livestock are fed GM-corn-based feed mixed with byproducts that include anything from M&Ms to raw meat, resulting diseased livestock that are slaughtered and mixed with other diseased livestock and sold to the consumers; MSG has been shown to stunt growth and contribute to obesity, nerve damage, and allergens; artificial sweeteners, such as aspartame (the sugar substitute in Diet Coke), inhibit leptin secretion and have been linked to headaches, dizziness, weight gain, nerve damage and cancer cell growth; refined oils are predominantly made from GMOs and consequently can cause cancerous cell growth, heightened allergic reactions, damaged immune systems, malformed organs, false pregnancies, and higher death rates; sodium nitrate and nitrite are preservatives in processed foods that turn into carcinogens in the stomach, increasing cancer risks; artificial colors and dyes are synthetic chemicals put into foods and hygiene products and link to hyperactivity, ADD, allergic reactions, and nerve damage.

But what can we do? The 21st century health epidemic seems to be a monumental task to overcome with no easy solutions. The simplest solution is for all parties to take responsibility. Federal and state governments must undertake their responsibility to endorse food supplies and products that are healthy and safe for the consumer to eat. The first step for the federal government must be to cut federal subsidies entirely to food industries and stop supporting corporations that use supplies that are dangerous to human health, the environment, and livestock as well as passing anti-trust legislation to break down the vertical trusts that have been dominating the food industry. Additionally, the federal government must lower the synthetic inflation of imported corn, pressure U.S. food industries through the FDA and USDA to cease the use of supplies and products deemed hazardous to human health, and promote healthier alternatives for food. Furthermore, the general public must be informed of the hazards of eating unhealthy foods and how they link to health problems. Unfortunately, food industries producing unhealthy products dominate advertising in the mass media, primarily because their products are cheap to produce, so more money can be spent on producing advertisements – Coca-Cola, for example, spent \$2.6 billion for advertisement in 2006 alone. However, if federal and state governments could fund public service announcements to raise awareness about the foods in the mass market, it could affect general attitudes and potentially stimulate action, much in the way public sensibilities regarding tobacco and alcohol changed over the late 20th century. For instance, tobacco advertisement was significant in the American media up until 1970, when Congress passed the Public Health Cigarette Smoking Act, which banned the advertisement of cigarettes on television and radio after numerous health reports pointed to the health risks of tobacco. Similarly, if the government would at least alert the unaware consumer of the health risks of eating commercialized foods, it would give the consumer a chance to make an informed decision. Another way federal and state governments must take responsibility is by not supporting legislations that favor the industries and corporations that create unhealthy foods and supplies. Schools and administrations must overhaul the foods they sell and

distribute to students and replace them with healthier alternatives and set health benchmarks for foods. However, the greatest duty is up to the consumer, as they have the greatest leverage of all: demand. Consumers must realize that they control the prices and that they must demand healthier alternatives. Ultimately, if the government continues its corporation-favored economic intervention, the consumers must be willing to pay more to purchase healthier alternatives. Consumers must not elect political candidates who support these corporations, as they often grant former-corporation lobbyists positions of power, such as former Monsanto lobbyist Michael Taylor, who has been recently appointed the senior advisor to the FDA commissioner on food safety. Consumers must support local produce, natural foods, and grassroots food lobbyist groups, such as the Organic Trade Association and the International Federation of the Organic Agriculture Movement. With these efforts combined, we can ultimately lower the price of the healthier foods we deserve. So look at the plate of food in front of you and make your decision before your body gives up on you.