

According to a large national survey, nutrient-poor food, or “junk food,” contributes nearly 30% of all the energy (calories) consumed in the US population. Efforts to reduce obesity should focus on both individual and policy actions to reduce the importance of nutrient-poor foods in the US diet.

Junk food makes up nearly one-third of calories in American diet

A study of 4,700 adults showed that, despite the increased popularity of low-carbohydrate diets, almost one-third of Americans' calories are coming from 'empty calorie' foods such as sweets and desserts, soft drinks, and alcoholic beverages. Salty snacks and fruit-flavored drinks make up another five percent. Lead researcher Gladys Block, a professor of epidemiology and public health nutrition at University of California, Berkeley, used data from a U.S. government survey called the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey. She analyzed the answers of participants interviewed in 1999 and 2000 who were asked to report all the foods they ate in the previous 24 hours.

"We know people are eating a lot of junk food, but to have almost one-third of Americans' calories coming from those categories is a shocker. It's no wonder there's an obesity epidemic in this country," Block said in a statement.

Sodas contributed 7.1 percent of the total calories eaten. Sweets topped the list, followed by hamburgers, pizza, and potato chips. By contrast, fruits and vegetables made up only about 10 percent of calories in the diet.

"It's important to emphasize that sweets, desserts, snacks, and alcohol are contributing calories without providing vitamins and minerals," said Block.

"You can actually be obese and still be undernourished with regard to important nutrients. We shouldn't be telling people to eat less—we should be telling people to eat differently."

Block G. Journal of Food Composition and Analysis. Volume 17, June-August 2004, 439-447.