

MEMO FROM MFJ

Spending to Save on Obesity



Everyone agrees that Canada has experienced an unprecedented obesity epidemic in the past 20 years. But how to stop it—and roll it back—is more controversial.

Since about 1990, obesity rates in children have tripled (to roughly 9 per cent). And they've jumped from 15 per cent to 25 per cent in adults. Another 36 per cent of adults are overweight but not yet hefty enough to be classified as obese.

Those hundreds of millions of extra pounds translates into more diabetes, more high blood pressure, more heart attacks, and more cancer... at an extra cost to the Canadian economy estimated at \$5 billion to \$30 billion a year.

The food industry says that obesity is largely a matter of personal responsibility—

no one is forced to eat fattening foods. As for kids, parents should just feed them healthy diets. Problem solved!

Unfortunately, the personal-responsibility line simply ain't working—and it won't work in a society that makes it sooo easy to over-eat and under-exercise. Blaming consumers is a convenient way to take the onus off industry, and it lets companies market whatever junk they want wherever they want.

That's why many health organizations (including the Centre for Science in the Public Interest, publisher of *Nutrition Action Healthletter*) have called for changes in the "toxic food environment."

We've had some successes. Nutrition Facts labels on packaged foods, for example, have

helped millions of people. And we're pushing for calorie labelling on chain-restaurant menus, healthier school foods, and stopping junk-food ads aimed at kids. All of that could help stave off weight gain.

But something else is needed: money.

To save billions of dollars a year in health-care costs down the road, we need to spend millions of dollars now in comprehensive anti-obesity programs.

For starters, we could devote a small percentage of the cost of obesity—\$600 million a year, say—to anti-obesity measures.

It sounds like a lot, but it's only a fraction of what companies spend advertising their doughnuts, fries, cookies, pop, and other products.

It's just 6 per cent of what governments collect from alcohol and tobacco taxes each year, and only 1 per cent of what Canadians spend eating out.

It pales in comparison with the \$121 billion (and counting)

that Canadians shell out for public healthcare every year.

Think of the \$600 million as an investment that could pay for tax deductions to facilitate worksite-wellness programs and help finance major mass-media healthy-eating campaigns, weight-loss counselling under Medicare, and cooking classes and healthier, tastier food in school cafeterias.

The question isn't whether we can afford to spend that much money to fight obesity. It's whether we can afford *not* to.

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Investing money now to fight obesity will save dollars—and lives—later.

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