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I’m pleased to be here in Maine with Representative Faircloth and Senator Bromley for the introduction of the nation’s first comprehensive anti-obesity legislation. Obesity is the fastest rising health problem in this country, increasing in adults by 75 percent in the last 10 years. Rates have doubled in children and tripled in teens over the last 20 years. Now, two thirds of adults are overweight or obese.

Obesity has fueled a 60 percent increase in diabetes over the last decade and type-2 diabetes has become so common in children that we no longer call it “adult onset” diabetes. Obesity-related health problems cost about $117 billion a year.

The rise in obesity rates is not due to a decline in Americans’ willpower. Life in modern America promotes eating and discourages moving. Ads encourage us to eat too much of the wrong kinds of foods. Neighborhoods are designed for driving not walking. Restaurants serve large portion sizes and few provide easy-to-use nutrition information. Labor saving devices like dishwashers and escalators reduce our need for physical activity. And, school districts are bridging budget gaps by selling junk food to kids.

With all these pressures to eat and barriers to activity, people could use some help. While ultimately it’s up to individuals to feed themselves and their families, healthy eating should not be like swimming up stream. The Maine anti-obesity legislation would make it easier for people to eat well, be physically active and maintain a healthy weight.

Away-from-home foods now provide about a third of adults’ and children’s calorie intakes. It’s not uncommon for restaurant entrees to provide a half a day’s worth of calories. Add side dishes, an appetizer or dessert and you can end up with a whole day’s calories with just one meal. A large McDonald’s chocolate shake has more than 1,000 calories—about a half a day’s worth just in a drink.

The nutritional quality of restaurant foods vary widely, but without nutrition information, it’s almost impossible to compare options. Many may not realize that a tuna salad sandwich from a typical deli can have 50 percent more calories and twice as much saturated fat as a roast beef sandwich with mustard.

While we have good nutrition labeling on packaged foods in supermarkets, at restaurants we can only guess what we’re eating. McDonald’s and Burger King congratulate themselves for providing nutrition information, but even their posters and pamphlets are hard to find and hard to read.

Calorie and other nutrition labeling at chain restaurants could help people to make more informed choices for a growing portion of their diet and could spur restaurants to reformulate and improve the nutritional quality of their offerings.
Soft drinks add calories to children’s diets—which many cannot afford—without providing nutrients. Studies show that sodas and juice drinks can displace more healthful foods in kids’ diets like low-fat milk, which can help prevent osteoporosis, or 100 percent fruit juice, which can prevent cancer. Less than a third of kids consume the recommended number of servings of milk each day and even fewer eat the recommended amount of fruit.

Studies show that children who drink more soft drinks consume more calories and are more likely to be obese. The answer to kids’ excessive soft drink consumption is not just more physical activity, as some in the food industry suggest. They also need to consume less. Although physical activity is critically important to children’s health and to maintaining a healthy weight, a 110-pound child would have to bike for one hour and 15 minutes to burn off just one 20-ounce Coke.

Removing junk food from schools does not have to result in less funding for important school programs. High schools and middle schools in Philadelphia, Minneapolis and California did not lose revenue and some even increased it when they removed most of the soda from their vending machines. After Vista High School (in California) improved the nutritional quality of the foods in their vending machines, the machines generated about $6,000 a month in profits.

We need to be sensitive to the economic pressures that schools face. However, we should not send children mixed messages—teaching one thing in the classroom and something else in the cafeteria. It’s short sighted to fund our schools at the expense of our children’s health. The result will be diet-related diseases that are sure to cost more than we can raise selling soda in schools.

Another important way to address the rising obesity rates is to strengthen modes of transportation that support physical activity, such as bike lanes, walking trails and safe routes to school. Our transportation policy also should ensure that all streets on which bicycles and pedestrians are permitted include appropriate accommodations for bicycling and walking to make those modes safe, easy and convenient choices for all people.

Few kids in the US walk or bike to school, even when school is close. The picture in front of many US schools is a traffic jam of minivans. Only 13 percent of trips made to schools are made by walking or biking. Implementing a Safe Routes to School program would provide funding for communities to make it safe for kids to walk or bike to school and open up new opportunities for children to be physically active.

Maine is the first state to take such a comprehensive approach to reducing obesity. The legislation addresses many of the key contributors to obesity and will make it easier for people to eat well, protect their children’s diets and health, be physically active, and maintain a healthy weight.

I urge state legislators, the governor and the public to support these measures. Given the cost of diet- and inactivity-related diseases, we can’t afford not to.

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