Spending to Save on Obesity

Everyone agrees that America has experienced an unprecedented obesity epidemic in the past 30 years. But how to stop it—and roll it back—is more controversial.

Since about 1980, rates of obesity have tripled, to roughly 18 percent for children and 34 percent for adults. That includes 33 percent of white, 39 percent of hispanic, and 44 percent of black adults.

If you combine overweight and obesity, you’re talking about a third of all kids and two-thirds of all adults.

Those billions of extra pounds translate into more diabetes, more high blood pressure, more heart attacks, and more cancer…and to an estimated $150 billion a year in increased medical costs.

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 so easy to overeat and under-exercise. Blaming consumers is a convenient way to take the onus off industry, and it lets companies market whatever they want however they want.

That’s why many health organizations—including the Center for Science in the Public Interest, publisher of Nutrition Action Healthletter—have called for changes in the “toxic food environment.” We’ve had some success. Nutrition Facts labels on packaged foods, for example, have helped millions of people. In the works are calorie labeling at chain restaurants, healthier school meals, and ads on junk foods aimed at kids.

But something else is needed: money.

To save tens of billions of dollars a year in healthcare costs down the road, we need to start by spending millions of dollars now in comprehensive anti-obesity pilot programs. The lessons we learn can then be applied nationally.

Let’s say we eventually decide to invest, say, 1 percent of the cost of obesity in rolling back obesity.

That’s $1.5 billion a year. Sounds like a lot? In 2010 Kraft spent $1 billion on advertising and other promotions, McDonald’s spent $1.3 billion, Procter & Gamble $4.6 billion.

What could $1.5 billion pay for? Tax deductions to facilitate worksite-wellness programs, for a start. And major media campaigns to encourage people to eat less junk food and more healthful foods. And cooking classes and healthier, tastier food in school cafeterias. And more hiking and biking trails.

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