



# Addressing the Obesity Challenge

Mary K. Muth

Food & Agricultural Policy Research Program  
Research Triangle Park, NC

Farm Foundation Forum, “Obesity, Food and  
Agricultural Policy: What’s the Connection?”  
National Press Club, Washington, DC  
November 9, 2010

# Special Theme on Obesity

# CHOICES

THE MAGAZINE OF FOOD, FARM, AND RESOURCE ISSUES

Google™ Custom Search

Search



[Back Issues](#) | [Editors](#) | [Submissions](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Outreach Partners](#) | [Policy Issues](#)

3rd Quarter 2010 | 25(3)

## Addressing the Obesity Challenge



## Addressing the Obesity Challenge

Mary Muth, Guest Editor

PDF VERSION

### Theme Overview: Addressing the Obesity Challenge

Mary K. Muth

Increasing rates of obesity and the associated effects on health of the U.S. population are often in the news recently. The set of papers in this theme describe measures of the costs of obesity, consider some of the contributors to increases in obesity, and evaluate current and potential solutions.

### The Costs of Obesity and Implications for Policymakers



## The Obesity Challenge

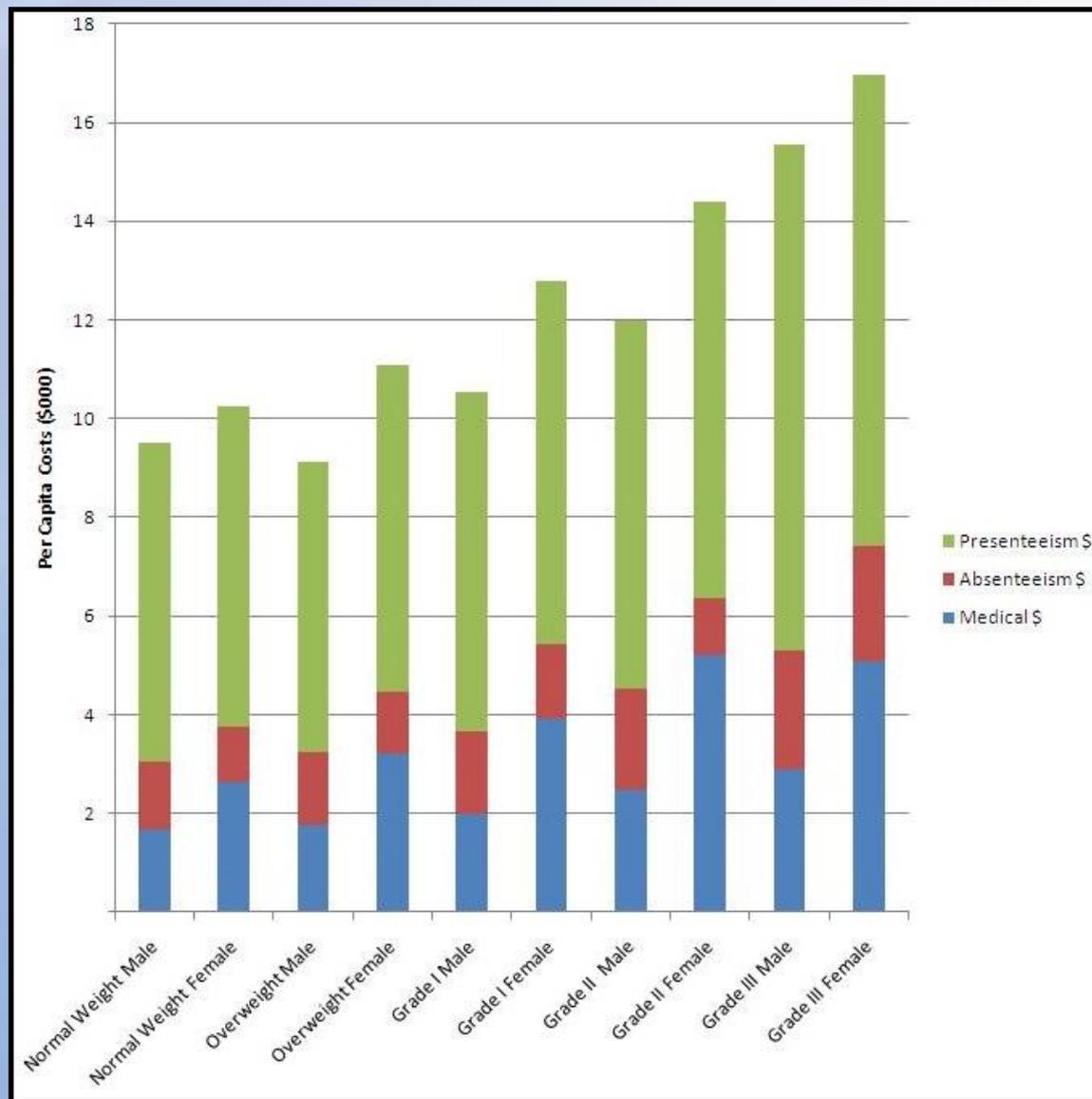
- The facts are well known...
  - About 1/3 of the U.S. population is obese and another 1/3 are overweight.
  - The prevalence of childhood overweight and obesity is currently about 1/3 of children and increasing.
  - The rates of obesity have increased dramatically over the past 30 years.
- Substantial resources are being put towards the task:
  - Michelle Obama's *Let's Move!* Campaign
  - CDC's Communities Putting Prevention to Work for community-based projects to address obesity
  - 2010 Affordable Care Act for demonstration projects aimed at reducing childhood obesity and requirements for nutrition labeling

## Outline of Articles

- Costs of Obesity
  - Eric Finkelstein, Kiersten Strombotne, & Barry Popkin
- Food Environment
  - Michele Ver Ploeg
- Farm Policy
  - Julian Alston, Brad Rickard, & Abigail Okrent
- Food Assistance
  - Helen Jensen & Parke Wilde
- Nutrition Labeling
  - Joanne Arsenault
- Soda Taxes
  - Jessica Todd & Chen Zhen
- Behavioral Economics
  - Sean Cash & Christiane Schroeter

# What Does Obesity Cost Our Society?

Direct costs (medical expenditures) and indirect costs among full-time employees (absenteeism and reduced productivity at work) increase substantially with the degree of overweight or obesity.



Source: Finkelstein, Strombotne, and Popkin (2010)



## What is the Role of the Food Environment?

- “Food deserts” are neighborhoods with few sources of healthy and affordable foods.
  - Often only served by convenience and fast food stores
  - 23.5 million people (8.4%) of U.S. population live in low-income neighborhoods more than one mile from a supermarket
- Studies have shown better access to supermarkets is *associated* with healthier diets and reduced obesity but not necessarily that store access *causes* differences in diet and obesity.
  - Data show that low income households seek out the lowest prices by traveling outside of their neighborhoods.
- Improving access to healthy foods is an issue for low income neighborhoods, but it is equally important to encourage demand for healthy foods.



## Is Farm Policy a Contributor?

- Farm policies are often cited as a contributor to the obesity epidemic because they are believed to make fattening foods relatively cheaper and more abundant.
- Two forms of farm policies:
  - Direct subsidy payments to farmers—lowers US prices
  - Indirect subsidies provided by trade barriers—raises US prices
- Policy simulations show extremely small effects of elimination of farm policies on caloric consumption.

Annual changes	Eliminate grain subsidies	Eliminate grain subsidies & trade barriers
Calories (kcal)	-977	198
Weight (kg)	-0.13	0.03
Weight (%)	-0.16	0.03



## How Does Food Assistance Factor In?

- Effects of food assistance programs:
  - Increase total food resources available which increases food energy (and reduces hunger) but also can improve food quality
  - Place limits on types of foods that can be purchased but only for some programs such as WIC and school meals
  - Provide nutrition education, particularly to encourage fruit and vegetable consumption
  - May affect market prices for some foods and also increase market access by expanding the market for food in some areas
- Some studies have shown a paradoxical effect that participation in food assistance programs is associated with higher risk of obesity.
  - This may be due to a variety of reasons that needs further exploration.



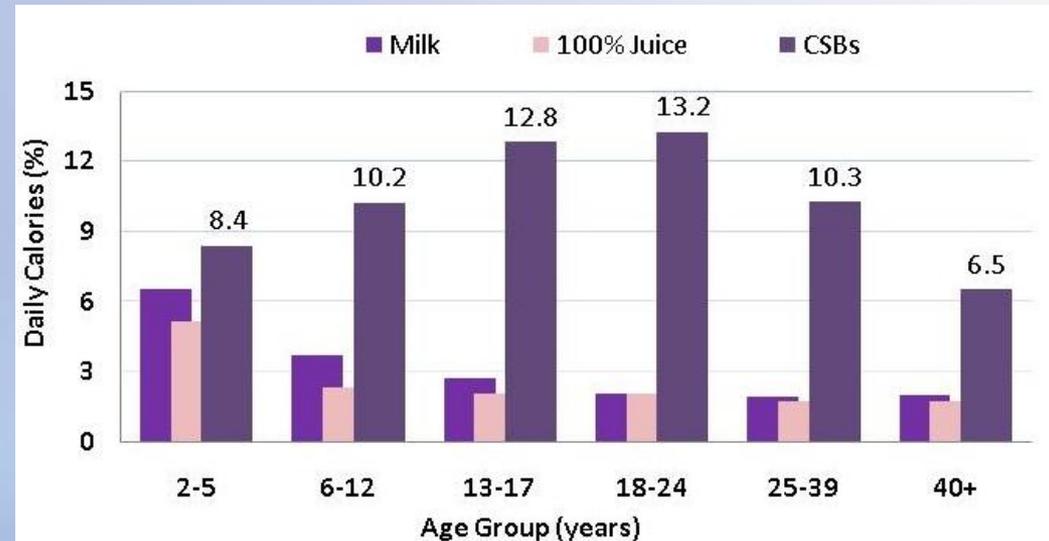
## Does Nutrition Labeling Matter?

- Nutrition Labeling & Education Act (1990) required nutrition labels—with calories—on all packaged foods.
  - Yet, rates of obesity continued to increase.
- For nutrition labeling to matter:
  - Consumers must (1) read the label, (2) understand the label, and (3) make decisions based on the label.
  - Indirect effects occur because food manufacturers are induced to reformulate foods to improve nutritional profile.
- Front-of-pack labeling may provide further incentive for both consumer and food manufacturer response.
- The Affordable Care Act (2010) requires calorie labeling on foods sold in restaurant chains with > 20 outlets.
  - Effects on food choices are not yet known.



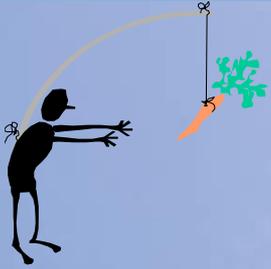
## Can Taxing Soda Help?

Calorically sweetened beverages (CSBs) make up a substantial portion of average total daily calories → 33 states have special sales taxes on CSBs with the intent to reduce consumption.



Source: Todd and Chen (2010)

- Excise taxes are more apparent and therefore may be more effective than sales taxes.
- Consumers will make substitutions in response to taxes, so all sweetened beverages should be taxed.
- High tax rates are needed for even modest effects but may help consumers kick the soda habit over time.



## Where Will Behavioral Economics Take Us?

- Research by behavioral economists have shown that when it comes to food choices, we rely heavily on habit and external cues that influence what and how much we eat.
- Behavioral economics approaches include
  - Changing the choice architecture (but not eliminating choices)
  - Nudging individuals towards making healthier choices
- Examples of approaches that appear to be effective include
  - Positioning healthier food choices with easier access than less healthy food choices
  - Increasing the effort involved in purchasing less healthy foods

## My Take-Aways from the Articles

- The obesity challenge will require a multitude of solutions—there is no magic bullet.
- Providing information via labeling and nutrition education is a necessary component but is not the solution.
- Adjusting the environment in which individuals make food choices is a key component, but it is important not to eliminate choice but to make it easier to make healthy choices.
- Economic solutions such as adjusting farm policy and taxing soda must be evaluated in an economic framework and not adopted blindly.

Full articles are available at  
<http://www.choicesmagazine.org/magazine/issue.php>

(3<sup>rd</sup> quarter 2010)

# Contact

**Dr. Mary K. Muth**

*Director, FAPR Program*

919.541.7289

[muth@rti.org](mailto:muth@rti.org)

