

## **Cutting 1.5 trillion calories**

*Companies seek solutions to reducing calories in products*

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by Jeff Gelski

With considerable food and beverage corporation involvement, the Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation (H.W.C.F.) took on a challenge in May. It joined with First Lady Michelle Obama and the Partnership for a Healthier America in pledging to reduce annual calories consumed in the United States by 1.5 trillion by the end of 2015.

To reach the goal, the H.W.C.F., and the food and beverage industry in general, might consider seeking assistance from other industries, said James O. Hill, Ph.D., a professor of pediatrics and medicine at the University of Colorado School of Medicine in Denver and director of the Center for Human Nutrition, also in Denver.

"I think we are going to need so much creativity to solve this problem," he said of obesity.

When the obesity epidemic first came into prominence, the food industry was first to be blamed, Dr. Hill said. Now the industry has responded, as evidenced by the H.W.C.F. goal.

"Of all the industries, they've demonstrated how they can take this on in a positive way," Dr. Hill said.

Other industries might shoulder some responsibility, too. The automobile, movie and computer industries promote sedentary activity, which may keep consumers from expending energy and calories through activity, Dr. Hill said.

The H.W.C.F. already includes members outside the food and beverage industry. Golf's PGA of America became the 100th H.W.C.F. member on Aug. 11. The Sports Authority, which operates more than 450 stores in the United States, is another non-food industry member.

Ingredient suppliers involved in the H.W.C.F. include monkfruit producer and processor BioVittoria, stevia extract supplier PureCircle Ltd. and Tate & Lyle, P.L.C. The suppliers are helping manufacturing companies in the H.W.C.F. as they pursue the calorie-reduction goal through developing and introducing lower-calorie options, changing recipes where possible to lower calorie content of current products or reducing portion sizes of existing single-serve products.

More approved low-calorie sweeteners have led to more low-calorie food and beverage products, said Beth Hubrich, a registered dietitian and the executive director of Atlanta-based Calorie Control Council, an international association that represents the low-calorie and reduced-fat food and beverage industry.

"Manufacturers are able to use the low-calorie sweetener best suited for that application, and they can also blend several sweeteners together, which is advantageous," she said. "Although weight management and weight loss require a host of tools, such as exercise, portion control, eating more fruits and vegetables, etc., another tool can also be low-calorie sweeteners and reduced-calorie foods and beverages."

Dr. Hill said new product introductions have shown promise in recent years. "I think the 100-calorie packs are brilliant," he said.

Dr. Hill and the Center for Human Nutrition led a study on calorie-controlled portion snacks. Published in the June 2009 issue of *Appetite*, the cross-over study involved randomly assigning 59 participants to receive either 100-calorie packs or standard size packs for one week. After a minimum of a one-week washout period, participants received the other form of the snack for one week. Results suggested portion-controlled packaging may have reduced total intake and that initial exposure to portion-controlled packages might have increased awareness of portion size, leading to the study's participants consuming less when larger packages were available.

Still, recent reports and surveys show America's problem with obesity has intensified, implying increases in the amount of calories consumed.

The report "State-Specific Obesity Prevalence Among Adults – United States, 2009," released Aug. 3 by the Atlanta-based Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, revealed the number of states with an obesity prevalence of 30% or more has tripled in two years to nine states in 2009. The report estimated medical costs in 2008 dollars associated with obesity at \$147 billion.

"Obesity continues to be a major public health problem," said Thomas Frieden, M.D., director of the C.D.C. "We need intensive, comprehensive and ongoing efforts to address obesity. If we don't, more people will get sick and die from obesity-related conditions such as heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and certain types of cancer, some of the leading causes of death."

Americans also apparently lack knowledge of calorie consumption. Twelve per cent accurately estimated the number of calories they should consume in a day for a person their age, weight, height and physical activity, according to the International Food Information Council Foundation's 2010 Food & Health Survey. Of those who said they are trying to lose or maintain weight, only 19% said they are keeping track of calories.

Cogent Research, Cambridge, Mass., conducted the study by contacting 1,024 people from April 30 to May 17. The margin of error was plus or minus 3%.

Amid such an environment, the H.W.C.F. took on its calorie challenge. Each company in the H.W.C.F. may keep its new products and plans confidential. The H.W.C.F. will be able to show the overall result without revealing confidential information.

"Creating new products is great, but we still have to do something with old-fashioned behavioral change," Dr. Hill said.

As long as highly palatable, energy-dense (high-calorie) food is cost-competitive with other food options, then Americans always may face a challenge in reducing calorie intake, said Jamy Ard, M.D., associate professor of nutrition science at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

"Broccoli will never be as palatable as a package of cookies," he said.

Consumers may need other incentives besides health reasons to eat food that is less energy dense, he said. The University of Alabama at Birmingham plans to play a role this year in incorporating healthy food purchases into a ChipRewards program at [www.chiprewards.com](http://www.chiprewards.com). The consumer health incentive program works in a similar way to other rewards programs, such as those involving hotel brand loyalty, Dr. Ard said. The ChipsRewards program includes rewards for preventive screenings, gym visits, prescription refills, flu shots, on-line education and healthy purchases.

Personal consumer decisions may add up as the H.W.C.F. strives for its goal of reducing calories by 1.5 trillion. According to the H.W.C.F., experts have estimated most of the population would stop gaining weight with an average reduction of about 100 calories per person per day. Ms. Hubrich, of the Calorie Control Council, said a person might lose 10 lbs in a year by cutting out 100 calories a day.

"As a dietitian, I think one of the keys to weight management and weight loss includes small, simple changes you can live with over time," she said. "And, for most people, cutting just 100 calories a day is very doable."

Cost of nutrient-dense foods continues to draw attention

The price disparity between healthful and less healthful foods appears to be growing, according to a study from the University of Washington and accepted for publication in Food Policy. The researchers described nutrient-dense foods as those that provide relatively more nutrients per calorie, which enable consumers to satisfy nutrient requirements without exceeding daily energy (calorie) needs. They gave whole grains, lean meats, low-fat dairy products, vegetables and fruit as examples of nutrient-dense foods.

Researchers obtained 378 foods and beverages from major supermarket chains in Seattle from 2004-08. The mean cost of foods in the top quintile of nutrient density was \$27.20/1,000 kcal, and the four-year price increase was 29.2%. Foods in the bottom quintile cost a mean of \$3.32/1,000 kcal, and the four-year price increase was 16.1%.

“The present findings, based on Seattle-area prices, clearly show that while all food prices have risen substantially between 2004 and 2008, the price of the most nutrient-dense foods has risen the fastest,” the researchers said.

The researchers said food policies must be examined not only in terms of how they may affect the affordability of food in the aggregate but also how they affect the affordability of the most nutritious foods in the food supply.