

Today's American Teenagers  
"Aware, but don't care"  
Analysis of Teenage Food Attitudes  
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**Misnourished** – term often employed to describe teenage eating habits; “enough calories are consumed, but not necessarily the right amounts” (De La Hunt)

**Junk food** – any food packaged with “empty calories”—an abundance of fat, sugar, sodium, and chemical—and little nutritional value (Physicians Desk Reference Family Guide to Nutrition Health)

## **I. Introduction**

- A. Snapshot of Food's Role in American Lives
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Teens have the basic nutritional skills they need to live long, healthy lives, as well as the aptitude to not literally heed junk food commercials and the money to follow through on the proper food choices, but they decide not to employ their knowledge for a variety of reasons. These reasons include, but are not limited to, food advertising, “adolescence” changes and resultant teen values (which also ties into a teen's lifestyle), and relationships with adults and other images projected by those older than the average teen (aged 13-18).

## **II. Body**

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- C. Ultimately, need a Culture Change: “Aware *because* I care.”

*“Feeding has changed from a necessity to a form of entertainment” (Levenstein 204).*

A snapshot of the role of food in Americans’ lives today would reveal a troubling image. About one third of Americans’ diets consist of sweets and desserts, soft drinks, fruit-flavored drinks and alcoholic beverages, and salty snacks, Gladys Block, professor of epidemiology and public health nutrition at the University of California, Berkley, concluded in her study most recent study. “We thought it was bad, but not *this* bad,” she exclaims (Severson A6). At the end of the 1980s, when this dietary shift was just beginning, “it was calculated that three-quarters of all Americans derived at least 20% of their energy needs from snacks. There were even predictions that ‘grazing’ would soon almost entirely replace formal meals” (Levenstein 236). Today Americans do not deviate very much from this prediction.

Before moving forward anymore, it is important to differentiate between the opposing nutritious and un-nutritious foods. The Physicians Desk Reference Family Guide to Nutrition Health defines, “junk food as any food packed with ‘empty calories’—an abundance of fat, sugar, sodium, and chemicals—and little nutritional value” (“Junk Food”). Avoiding this kind of food is not an absolute statement like eating the forbidden fruit because, as most dieticians agree, moderation in any type of food consumption is still acceptable behavior. The problem here is the degree of penetration of snacking on nutritionally meager foods throughout American culture.

This “national orgy of snacking”, as termed by PDRHealth (“Junk Food”), is at a minimum an American problem, but most likely more widespread than this. Considering how

hard it is to evaluate other nations as an outsider, Americans will be the focus of this paper—specifically American teenagers.

At the center of this picture is the teenage faction. Teen relationships with snack food consist of spending money in order to quickly satisfy the physical demands of a growing body. Per year, teenagers spend \$13 million at fast-food restaurants, while Americans in general spent \$110 billion in 2000 on fast food—which was more than was spent on education or entertainment (Holladay). Teens are also the demographic group that need the most total caloric intake and nutrient needs (Story, Mary, Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, and Simone French S41), with teen girls needing about 2,200 calories and teen boys needing about 2,800 calories (De La Hunt).

‘Misnourished’ is the term that might be used to describe the large percentage of unhealthy teens nowadays that “get enough calories but not necessarily the right nutrients” (De La Hunt). “[Teens today] eat double the amount of pizza and salty snacks, and six times more cheeseburgers than teenagers did 20 years ago” (Silva). The picture of both Americans’ and teenagers’ relationship with food is a continually-snack-laden picture that disturbs even the most experienced professionals.

Most distressing of all is teenager’s overall outlook and treatment of junk food. Teens know about eating a balanced diet by following the Food Pyramid and minimal high fat, salt, sugar, and low fiber foods (Murphy); but they do not choose to express their knowledge in their actual food choices. Their attitude can be described as, “Aware, but don’t care.”

Teens are aware of both the proper nutritional guidelines and the misleading advertisements about un-nutritious foods. Although there is wide variance in the depth of

knowledge a teen may have of healthy eating habits, teens are at least aware of what foods should be consumed in greater quantities than others (De La Hunt). For example, that more apples should be eaten per day than ice cream cones. A teen may not know how to precisely read a label or how to calculate the exact portion of sodium, fat, or fiber eaten that day; but there is no excuse in today's society for a teen not to know about the Food Pyramid and how to add up to serving numbers of less than ten. De La Hunt argues that school systems provide enough nutrition education and don't forget that there are government mandates for nutritional education for all of America's children (Murphy, Anne S., et al). Even with the most basic nutritional knowledge, a teen has the sense to know that more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains should be eaten per day in comparison to sugary drinks, fatty and/or sodium laden foods.

Today's teens have grown up in a highly advertised society, so they know very well (especially at their level of maturation) the function of food advertisements; don't make teens out to be naïve and easily contorted by advertisements, mirroring exactly what they absorb. Teens know better than to eat the "prime-time" diet that is so heavily promoted by the food industry and portrayed by a large portion of their surrounding society. Armed with both the skills and awareness of proper nutrition requirements (or at least the basics) and extensive experience of food advertisement immersion, teens should have complete control over their nutritional intake.

Not so, though. Instead, teens don't care about what they eat. Interviews with teens themselves reveal this "Aware, but don't care" attitude even more. "There's plenty of time to be boring and eat tofu when we're 35," one 19-year-old girl admits (Farrington). She knows what she is doing is not correct, but she plans to make-up for her detrimental behavior in the future when, unfortunately, it seems it will be too late. "I don't do anything much that's healthy unless

I think it will make me look better,” an 18-year-old girl testifies (Farrington). Unless there is a direct physical appearance benefit for this girl, she will not do anything. Note that eating food is not commonly thought of as a way to improve physical appearance. Another teen pointedly disclaims, “Teens want to eat fries and greasy stuff. They don’t care if it’s good for you” (Lee). Each of these individuals’ opinions are not exclusive, but closely representative of some of the views of the majority of the population.

Beyond direct testimonials, there are statistics demonstrating how little teens care about their diet. “In 2000, national data show[ed] that only 1% of adolescent males and females met national requirements for all Food Guide Pyramid groups, and [on the other end of the spectrum, a whopping] 18% of girls and 7% of boys did not meet any of the recommendations” (Story, Neumark-Sztainer, and French S41). Common ideals and perceptions of food must be widely held if such startling conclusions are to be made. Just 2 out of every 200 teens (100 boys and 100 girls) are eating according to requirements. A much larger percent of the total teen population has been educated on nutrition than one out of every one hundred, so some connecting piece must be missing between their knowledge and their actions.

Teenagers are aware of both the persuasive junk food ads as well as the requirements of a healthy diet, but they don’t care enough to go the extra step and synthesize the two together to make consistent healthy food decisions. Teens have traditionally had a rebellious, care-free nature, but never before have such dramatically negative results been observed.

This paper will not be about unearthing the origin of this attitude or determining who to blame for its conception, but exploring some of the factors that play a role in teenage indolence. Teens have the basic nutritional skills they need to live long, healthy lives, as well as the aptitude

to not literally heed junk food commercials and the money (about \$101 per week (Wood) ) to follow through on the proper food choices they know about, but they decide not to employ their knowledge for a variety of reasons. These reasons include, but are not limited to, food advertising, “adolescence” changes and resultant teen values (which also ties into a teen’s lifestyle), and relationships with adults and other images projected by those older than the average teen (age 13-18).

*“[The food industry] is an industry that both feeds and feeds off the young” (Schlosser 9).*

First the food industry’s role in the “don’t care” attitude will be examined. Food advertisers, or make that any advertiser, follow the motto of “the more the merrier”; the more promotions and involvement of a certain product in the consumer’s life, the more likely he/she is to buy it. In order to earn the money teens have from family and jobs, advertisers will bombard a teen to “become part of the fabric of their lives,” as one executive describes (Kraak).

For teens, the majority of this fabric is unhealthy food products. “About half of all advertising aimed at teens is for food...of which only 2% is for fruits, grains, or vegetables” (Holladay). The latter advertisements are also not as likely to be effective in conveying their message because of the superior, more sophisticated opposing advertisements of un-nutritious foods. Unhealthful food ads become an easy, free mode of entertainment for teens that they will continue to respect over more nutritional advertising attempts. The healthy foods certainly cannot compete with such robust numbers, but it is the combined effect of *all* advertising on teens that has the greatest influence on their “don’t care” attitude.

Advertising is one of the many players in a culture that just won't shut up and turn off...and give us a time to connect with our real selves (Farrington). Teens are experts in multi-tasking and being involved in more than enough extra-curricular activities, so any free moment will be spent on something of more importance than food. With so much going on in teens' lives, it's hard to imagine how hunger can even be discerned under all the stresses of their daily activities infested with enticing advertisements. Kelly Brownell of the Yale Center for Eating and Weight Disorders therefore comes to the conclusion that our environment, "almost guarantees we will be 'sick'" (29). Bombardment results in only remote awareness of food advertisements, but there is so much going on in the average teenager's life without having to deal with deciphering ads or even basic bodily needs that calculated food decisions are now overridden by impulse.

Teens are famous for being short-sighted and "living in the now," so the concept of impulses driving the majority of their purchases is not far-fetched. For teens it is hard to consistently take the situation at hand out of its immediate scope and think of the future, of the fallout diseases and complications from poor decisions during the "critical years" of development. Although teens can understand appropriate food choices, hormonal and maturational impulses (rooted partly in food advertisements) often run counter to this knowledge (Sigman-Grant S32). Hormones and maturation are two of the signature traits of growing up and living as a teenager.

As a teen matures, develops, and grows many changes are occurring physically, mentally and socially that relate to food choices. The increased caloric and nutrient intake has already been discussed. Mental changes include skepticism, personal confidence, and discrimination of

dynamic situations. Teens can be described as, “Deeply suspicious of the adult world, of government authority, of journalists, of social scientists, of marketing persuasion, and even popular culture marketers,” (“Brand-Driven”) which plays in a favorable manner towards teen awareness of complex food ads and making choices independently, but deters any attempts of reinforcing nutritional guidelines from those above teens.

Socially, the teen years are defined as a search for identity, the person you want to be when you grow up. At the same time, though, teens may be more than usually susceptible to advertising [during this time] when identities are in flux (Farrington). The search for identity pokes a hole in a teen’s skills at deciphering ads and protecting his/herself from tempting promotions. They might “not care” that they are using a fast food ad to support their decision to buy unhealthy food, because the changes during adolescence make a teen more vulnerable to advertising. Socially teens are also seeking independence (Charboneau 13). This newly fostered value can lead to not caring what anyone or –thing advises because of stubborn independence and closed mindedness.

Put the social, mental, and physical changes together, and the result is a new lifestyle. The norm of busy schedules that are crunched for time and practically require a break make it easier for the appeal of “junk food as fun food” to grow even more unmanageable. Teens are looking for fun, so they look to food to satisfy their deficiency and to get away from it all for a few moments during their hectic day (Farrington).

Teen maturation and development are closely tied to lifestyle changes, all three of which the food industry pounces on to make the almighty dollar. Whether the teens or the industry



started this relationship is not important; only the dynamics and interaction of the two groups is realistically applicable. Don't fight about the past when the present is at stake.

The "don't care, so give me my snack food" attitude just was discussed only in reference to the food industry. The intense demand for sweet, salty, fatty, low fiber, high calorie snacks has recently had a new spin thrown into the mix. People used to think that, "sugar [wa]s just as addictive as tobacco and alcohol" (Levenstein 193); but, since the late 1970s, this has been interpreted more as an urban legend than true scientific fact. Now there have been studies released possibly proving the addictive qualities of un-nutritious foods by using mice on high calorie, fat, and carbohydrate diets that end up denying nutritious foods ("Can we") and also by comparing dopamine receptor concentrations of obese and normal weight people with drug addicts' ("Temptation abounds"). The scientific and health professions are not as sure as they were before. Either way, it is well-known that the food industry deliberately makes food that does not satisfy by loading up on the empty calories, sugar, and flavorings to increase insulin secretion to make the consumer of the product want more, even if they are not hungry (Stitt).

Another thing to consider in the "don't care" category is the power teens have to eat un-nutritious foods due to parental relations. Not only are kids demanding more un-nutritious foods, but parents are going along with their child's stubborn ultimatums and, more often than not, don't care *enough* themselves to strictly enforce healthy eating habits. Parents are afraid their kids wouldn't eat anything if they didn't allow the junk. Junk food is better than no food, one parent basically rationalizes (Lee). "The number one problem is convincing parents this all is a problem. They have so many fears...poor nutrition isn't even on the list of the top 10 things they

fear” (Silva). With both the parents and teens preoccupied with other concerns, it makes it very difficult for anyone to care about healthy food consumption.

But even when parents do try to encourage their kids to eat healthfully there are still contradicting images of the average American citizen and other types of teenage role models. This is not just celebrities and other famous people in the spotlight, but the average American who’s overweight and adamantly eating un-nutritious food, too. From people close to home in malls, walking on the streets, and doing errands, to people on TV, in the movies, or in advertisements, very few Americans are visibly or openly eating healthfully. It is very difficult to find a nutritionally-sound role model for a teen to follow, let alone repeated examples (as would be needed to persuade a teen to change their habits). Whether a teen sees their fellow junk food-loving Americans in person or through some other media does not matter. It is the repeated images of inappropriate behavior that resonate most clearly. There is so much activity in today’s American teen’s life that repetition or specific focus on achieving a goal are the best ways to establish habits and values. When a teen spends their day with these people that don’t care about the nutritional value of their intake, it makes it hard for a teen to follow a minority’s lead in an already complicated life.

“As a society, we’ve told [teens] to eat what they like and do what they want, and failed to inoculate them with good habits” (Penman). It is the everyday image of someone exhibiting unhealthy practices that most resonates in the critical eye of a teenager. When a teen sees that Americans overall “just don’t care enough to change they way they are eating” (Farrington), there is no real driving force to change his/her ways, so enforcing the “don’t care” attitude.

The influences from the food industry's advertising, adolescent changes in values and lifestyle, and the relationship of teens with their parental figures and the average American citizen, put all into one picture, and the outcome is an unhealthy, shorter life. "American children may be the first generation in modern history to live shorter lives than their parents did" (Brownell 43) and "adolescents are the only demographic group whose health is getting worse" (Penman). Teens are smarter than this trend makes them out to be in the sense that they *do* know what foods are nutritious and advantageous to maximum development. But there's a difference between knowing something and acting upon it. Certain changes must immediately occur to help nurture this shift.

The most obvious alternative would be to re-teach and re-drill proper nutrition habits and decoding of food advertisements as soon as a child reaches the teen years and repeat until that child "graduates" from teenage-hood. As would be expected, theories and realities are not the same, though. "The knowledge of nutrition necessarily didn't carry over to food choices" (Silva). "Telling the risks to health or discussing the nutrient value of foods has not been effective" (Kraak 38), either.

Continuing with non-viable alternatives, the European proposed solution of a "fat tax" (Ingham) will not be an effective solution to American teenage food attitudes because a large portion have discretionary income from their parent. American insurance companies have discussed up to twenty percent discounts on patrons that are of proper weight, but recall that teens usually don't pay for their own health insurance fees.

Directly working off the three factors discussed contributing to the teenage "don't care" attitude to try to reverse the bad into good, it also becomes apparent that the values and lifestyle

of teenagers are deeply rooted into American culture and cannot be easily or comfortably removed from the core values of being a teen. An anthropological concept developed by Mazón explains why it is so difficult to change certain aspects of a culture using a Blob Model. To explain his theory, think of American culture not as a Blob, but an orange. Traits that are easily imitated (like fashion, hair colors....) would be represented on the outside. The core, unique attributes about being an American would be in the inside with the seeds. First the peel has to be removed and then the aggravation of encountering a seed would have to be undertaken, all the while being squirted with acidic, citric acid juice. The same would go for trying to change American culture (with juice in the eyes and all). In short: not an easy task.

The other two areas contributing to the “don’t care” attitude can be helpful in finding a solution for this teenage food attitude problem. Both adult players in teens’ lives and food advertisements can increase the awareness of healthy food options and balanced nutrition in mediums throughout the society (including home, personal entertainment time, school).

By working from the inside (with the problem of advertising) outward (to the solution), mimicking unhealthful advertising techniques to the advantage of healthy food promotions. “Kids are bombarded with fast food—even in school, but I (a researcher) have proven if you give them healthy alternatives, they’ll make the right choice and life-changing results will follow” (Stitt). One school lunch program in Georgia made salads look like McShakers and sales soared from 40/day to 300 (Lee). Other venues have decided to make fresh fruit and vegetables free of charge, and therefore a more enticing alternative to the traditional un-nutritious food. Every time the idea of government intervention of on advertisement content, location/time, and sponsorship opportunities arises, huge backlash comes from the industry’s lobbyists (Hughes). In the off-

chance that the government decided to rule against these agendas, changes in food habits would most certainly be expected; it would just take a little time for the changes to fully manifest themselves.

Encouraging new parental practices is the cheapest method of the three because most parents would willingly change and would do so without charging a fee. This also makes this change the easiest to carry out. “It’s really important for parents to provide an environment that’s healthful,” says Keith-Thomas Ayoob, a prominent New York-based pediatric nutritionist and counselor. “That means banishing snacks from their own diets, buying healthy foods, adding exercise to their routine and forgetting about quick fixes like supplements and diet pills” (De La Hunt). Being a role model to a teen is the first step in achieving change, at whatever scale it may be. Simpler than that, “the best way to get teens to boost their consumption of fruits, vegetables and dairy foods [i]s for parents to simply be present at the evening meal” (De La Hunt). It’s not as much, “taking away food choices,” and labeling items as ‘good’ and ‘bad’—which, by the way, would only make it more tempting to an independence-seeking teen, “but instilling discipline,” De La Hunt argues.

All of these proposed changes ultimately suggest the nearly impossible: a cultural change. Change is required from the youngest to oldest end of the American spectrum. The more a habit is seen favorably by all members of a society, the greater chance of success it has—it’s like a fad or fashion trend. Healthful eating needs to become the societally “in” thing to do. It is unreasonable to expect teens to change when no one else around them is changing. There is enough on the forefront of teenage minds as it already is, leaving little room for criticism and responsibilities about their favorite pastime: eating. If such changes were to occur on a large

enough scale that the worrisome trends of declining teenage health—especially concerns related to the most controllable preventative factor: food—were flipped, then most likely the “Aware, but don’t care attitude” would just become “Aware because I care.”

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