

WHY AMERICA LEADS THE WORLD IN UNHEALTHYNESS

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You have to remember (or study your history of the last half of the 20th century) what the world was like at the end of the 2nd world war. Much of Great Britain had been bombed into ruins. Most of Europe, not fully recovered yet from WW One, in 1939 became a giant battlefield. Many of its cities and towns were bombed into ruins. Agriculture everywhere ceased, farms abandoned, farmers killed or conscripted and left far from home. Livestock were not being fattened up for slaughter and even skinny cows, chickens and pigs were a rarity. The diary of Anne Frank reveals a stark history of diets and lifestyles in Europe of the day.

Japan and all of the countries they had invaded and occupied were also in ruins as were their economies. Starvation and malnourishment were widespread. Recovery was painfully slow over the coming decades. Korea suffered a devastating civil war and the North still today has severe food shortages. China had a massively destructive civil war and has only recently begun to recover enough to raise their standard of living by providing enough food for many, but not all of its citizens.

America on the other hand was in good shape in 1945. We had won. We had emerged from our "Great Depression" in the 1930s and prevailed over the two greatest, most powerful and evil empires the world had ever known. Our farmers were turning out food at a record pace. Instead of feeding mostly the troops all this food now entered the civilian economy. Rationing of foods such as meat and dairy ceased. Synthetic fertilizers were invented. Corn yields jumped from 80 bushels per acre to greater than 100 BPA. Today corn yields are near 300 BPA. Corn is used to fatten up livestock making the meat tender and unhealthy. It is also used to make high fructose corn syrup which is added to almost all processed foods. Such foods alas make up much of the American diet. High fructose corn syrup is the main sweetener in most soft drinks and a common one in other foods (including breakfast cereals, salad dressings, cheese spreads, yogurts, jams, and peanut butter, among others.) The average American consumes more than 400 calories a day as sugar. That amounts to 146,000 non-nutritious calories per year, which could cause you to gain as much as 40 lbs per year.

During WW2, the tobacco companies had provided cheap/free cigarettes to the troops, almost all of whom came home with nicotine addiction. Addiction at the time was denied by Big Tobacco and unrecognized by the medical community. Cigarettes were advertised everywhere and "9 out of 10 doctors" smoked Camels or Lucky Strikes or Chesterfields. Cigarettes were the pot of the 40s, but completely legal. Even children could freely buy them, no questions asked.. My parents and all their friends smoked. I started smoking at age 13. Smoking was "cool". Cigarettes were 5-10 cents per pack.

Soon after the end of WW2, the Soviet Union expanded westward and eventually occupied much of Europe. The economic recovery of Europe from WW2 was slowed or prevented by threatened or actual imposition of Communism at gunpoint.

Can you see where I am headed with this? America had a several decades head start over the rest of the world in eating and drinking too much and smoking tobacco products. The Baby Boomers initially enjoyed and now are suffering greatly from this lifestyle of excess."

The “Healthcare Crisis” is directly attributable to the ready availability and low costs of TOO MUCH FOOD. We all have a program in our heads: “clean your plate”. Have you ever said that to your kids? I have.

Greater health consciousness has only recently come in vogue in America. The driving force for this has been the recognition of the consequences of unhealthy diets and expanding waistlines. 90% of Americans become hypertensive before they die. We have a pandemic of diabesity that makes the “swine flu” seem like a minor inconvenience. When I was a kid there weren’t any fat people except on exhibition at carnivals. Now they are everywhere. 20% of 4 year old children are obese. Overweight passengers are forcing aircraft makers to upgrade their planes to super-jumbo proportions. In a sign of the times, new planes since 2008 have wider seats, wider aisles and bigger toilets. A US Government report found airlines are facing heftier fuel costs because of heavier passengers.

Primitive humans walked, chased and climbed daily to get just enough food to survive. We can get in our cars and drive to a restaurant that serves “all you can eat”. Our every holiday is celebrated by eating too much and then rolling around on the floor or couch groaning in pleasure.

The healthcare crisis results from the skyrocketing costs of health care, especially for older adults (the baby boomers) and the resultant unaffordability of health insurance. The rising costs of healthcare is directly attributable to the ever rising incidence of hypertension, high cholesterol, diabesity and many other medical conditions which are the consequence of unhealthy diets and lifestyles. If we took as poor care of our cars as we do our bodies, and drove as carelessly as we eat, auto insurance would be unavailable/unaffordable for most of us.

Insurance is a bet by State Farm that your house will not burn down, or a bet by USAA that you won’t crash your car. Flood insurance in New Orleans and hurricane insurance in South Florida is a poor bet for them to make, so the costs of those policies have risen accordingly. Health insurance for pre-existing conditions is not “insurance” in the usual sense of the term. Could you buy a new home owners policy if your kitchen was in flames and the fire engines on the way? Could your family buy a new life insurance policy for you if you were already dead?

Our only hope is that all of us must take much better care of ourselves. The high cost of healthcare and health insurance is going to continue to rise until we do. At 40 I quit smoking, started jogging, changed my diet, dropped my cholesterol from 240 to 140 without drugs, ran marathons in my 50s and saved my life. Now 75 I still walk the talk. I tell my audiences and patients “If I can do it, so can you!” If large numbers of us do, Big Pharma’s profits would plummet and the waiting rooms in doctor’s offices would not be so full anymore. The costs of health insurance would come down and Congress and the White House could pay more attention to our two wars, repairing and upgrading our crumbling infrastructure such as railroads, highways and bridges, global warming and the ever rising costs of postage stamps.