Too Much of a Good Thing!

By Shawn Stevenson, Source Water Technician

Since the beginning of the modern age (*Middle Ages*), humankind has been aware that what we ingest changes us. Even as modern medicine progresses, it also seems to revert back to age old homeopathic remedies. Every week there is another news story stating that scientists have discovered a new possible cure for a disease with a commonly known product, either natural or synthetic. We also are constantly bombarded by the media with data of clinical trials regarding common dietary goods. They either have found them to reduce the chance of an illness or are a possible cause. The key to our health is within our grasp; what we choose to put in our bodies can make a difference.

So called "toxins" surround our lives, yet the amount of exposure to these substances can affect our health dramatically. We don't always make a conscious decision in regard to exposure to these, but we do decide on some level what we ingest. Realizing that the title of this article is a bit of a cliché, I feel compelled to offer this quote: "You'll find that many of the truths we cling to, depend greatly on our own point of view" (A. Guinness, 1983). This is not to say that food itself is the problem, but how it is used might be. Another suitable question is, do you live to eat or eat to live? I am not posing the question to criticize anyone, but to increase the awareness that exposure to certain triggers through daily interaction can shape our behavior when it comes to what we eat.

Too much of any substance can cause health problems, this rings true for vitamins, water and even oxygen. Vitamins taken in excess can reach toxic levels and can result in major organ damage. Too much water can reduce salt levels in the blood and can promote several ill affects. Even oxygen has a sinister side "Oxygen is the ultimate toxin" according to Michael Thrush toxicologist for Bloomberg School of Public Health. Oxygen combines with food to create energy, but our bodies also produce oxygen radicals that breakdown DNA, proteins, and fats. "We are oxidizing all the time." This means that the cost of breathing is aging. In a sense the body rusts (National Geographic, May, 2005).

Several substances that are typically deemed bad are also advantageous in very small amounts. The flipside is the belief that consuming things that are believed to be good for us even in excessive amounts will still provide positive results. The inner fabric of millions of lives are bound by some type of substance aside from the necessity; for many people it is coffee (caffeine), nicotine or even ***food***.

Two thirds of the American population is overweight. What is the cause of this? Is it that we are collectively gluttonous, or is it the society we live in? Researchers indicate that it is a variety of things with no single answer. The advertising marketplace utilizes the instilled American way of life; that bigger is better. (*Would you like to super-size that for another forty nine cents?)* We want more for our money when we go to a restaurant and we expect big portions. Meals typically served in restaurants exceed 1000 calories without beverages. * A bigger portion typically means that more is consumed.

There are many factors contributing to what we eat and the size of the portion. The size and shape of things plays an important role. Attractive packaging based on size and shape not only affects whether the item is purchased, but the amount consumed. Something that is esthetically pleasing to the eyes and ears is more readily eaten. Although these factors influence our decisions, usually they aren't even given any forethought. Consider the menu of your favorite restaurant; typically every item is jazzed up with a unique and succulent name. Reflect on an item called Grilled Chicken Breast versus Caribbean Flame Roasted Chicken Breast, which are you more likely to order? Without an eloquent preparation narrative, the likelihood of ordering it goes down dramatically, as well as a reoccurrence later.* The name instills a preconceived notion that the item is tasty and unique. Does this go beyond good advertising and appeal to our subconscious?

Texture promotes the fun in snack foods. Snacks that are crispy, crunchy, and salty make us thirsty and even hungrier. Is the name "snack" not now synonymous with processed food? Snack food (*excluding crackers*) is an $18 billion dollar industry annually. Tracking the consumption of snacks is not an easy task since many of us snack without really thinking about it. The average adult

skips breakfast and lunch combined 105 times per year and generally supplements it with snacking. So the amount eaten for that day was not necessarily decreased with the meal being skipped. Not only taste is involved in this growing trend, but convenience and proximity is a major contributor (NPD, Foodworld 2001).

In a study at a movie theater, several movie goers were given stale two week old popcorn for free. The difference was some received large buckets while others got medium buckets. The people who had the large buckets ate 31% more than the people with the medium portion. When asked afterward, both sets of people replied that they had eaten the same amount (Nutrition Action, March 2004, Vol.31, #2).

You are what you eat! Well not entirely, not only what we eat but how much changes us on a molecular scale. So what we eat and how much depends on several factors. Some of these things are within our control, while others are ingrained in modern culture. A term like "comfort food" is a good example of how we identify food with pleasure. Consider this at your next large meal; by placing the fork back on the plate after every bite, the rate at which someone eats slows down dramatically. It can also reduce the amount eaten since the feeling of fullness takes up to twenty minutes to be generated from the brain. This is not to say that you shouldn't enjoy your food, but that some of the behavioral controls associated with it can be brought to light. Just some food for thought.

*= some of the content derived from referenced source *(Nutrition Action, March 2004, Vol.31, #2).

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