

Curbing the Obesity Epidemic: Understanding Latinos' Challenges to Healthy Eating in the United States

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Received Date: October 06, 2014 Accepted Date: October 10, 2014 Published Date: October 21, 2014

Citation: Viladrich A (2014) Curbing the Obesity Epidemic: Understanding Latinos' Challenges to Healthy Eating in the United States. J Food Nutr 1: 1-2

“Globesity” is the term that perhaps best represents the growing obesity trend affecting about five hundred million people worldwide [1]. This phenomenon is most prevalent among the poor and disadvantaged, for whom high obesity rates go hand in hand with cardiovascular disease, diabetes and even cancer. This editorial hopes to shed light on the growing rates of obesity among Latinos (or Hispanics) in the United States (US). To that end, I aim to underscore the close-knit relationship between structural and cultural determinants of health that, together, impinge on the growing morbidity and mortality rates associated with Latinos' overweight and obesity patterns in the US.

Latinos are currently the largest ethnic minority group in the US, projected to be 25% of the population by 2050, which present higher rates of overweight and obesity than other ethnic/racial groups, particularly among children. Undoubtedly, poverty and economic barriers are among the key factors that impinge on Latinos' poor diets leading to overweight and related outcomes. Low-income Latinos tend to favor cheap, energy-dense foods that are obesogenic due to their high contents of salt, sugars, fats and refined grains that together are associated with higher risks of obesity, type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease [2].

However, poverty and economic barriers to healthy foods alone are not enough to explain Latinos' increasing obesity trends. An ecological perspective is needed here to consider the influence of physical and social environments on food practices and individual habits including sedentary life styles and lack of physical activity. These environments are best exemplified by a super-abundance of cheap, low-nutrition staples in areas that are loaded with liquor stores but lack affordable supermarkets offering healthy, culturally familiar foods [3,4]. The obesogenic environment (including “food swamps” in low-income neighborhoods) seems to conflate with individual barriers to healthy eating that include Latinos' financial constraints to buying fresh produce and fruits, along with having little time to cook healthy meals due to long working hours outside of the home [5].

Furthermore, cultural factors have been shown to greatly influence Latinos' eating trends and food practices.

The literature has amply documented the connections between dietary acculturation and obesity risk in the US [5,6], with length of stay correlating with rising rates of obesity and chronic disease [7]. Despite this relevant body of work, little is known about how Latinos' traditional beliefs impact (either positively or negatively) their food choices and eating practices in the US [8].

In addition, more research is needed about the culinary staples that Latinos retain, even decades after having settled in the US. In this vein, traditional notions of acculturation may not be enough to explain immigrants' dietary changes in bicultural environments. In order to address these issues, my latest work on Latinos' traditional foods and eating practices in the US has focused on understanding the complex cultural and structural factors that underscore immigrants' food choices, along with the culinary changes they experience in the societies of destination. My team and I have coined the term “nostalgic foods” to symbolize the complex ways in which Latino immigrants (and their families) retain as well as modify their traditional food practices in diverse contexts of reception [9,10].

Rather than experiencing a linear process of acculturation (i.e., abandoning traditional diets in favor of American ones), Latino families seem to merge their culturally familiar foods with what is available (and affordable) to them in the societies of destination. Our results suggest an interaction between the retention of heavy traditional foods that are cheaper and easy to access and the incorporation of obesogenic practices (e.g., snacking and consuming cheap fried foods), many of which are imprinted in the urban environment [10].

The “nostalgic foods” construct has several key implications for health programs and policy. Culturally appropriate interventions have been shown to assist families in keeping their familiar foods but with lower levels of fat, salt and sugars [11]. Through targeted educational programs it would be possible to increase awareness about deleterious food choices and teach Latinos to prepare healthier foods. For instance, in a study on parents' perspectives on healthy eating, Flores, et al. [11] found that Latino parents were eager to modify traditional meals/snacks in order to make the foods healthier as

well as more palatable. Our research also shows that Latinas are concerned about their poorer eating habits in the US and would welcome programs and incentives that would teach them prepare healthier, low-fat traditional foods that would help them lose weight [12].

Community-based interventions that connect neighborhood programs with impoverished families could take advantage of resources already found in areas where Latinos live. For instance, community gardens and school programs could be used to teach families and their children to grow and incorporate healthy produce into their diets. Finally, as noted by Greder, et al. [13], having immigrant families' representation on school and community advisory committees would ensure that programs and policies are informed by their experiences and needs.

When it comes to assessing and understanding Latinos' growing obesity rates, the existing research and data are far from conclusive. We need more mixed-method studies on Latinos' beliefs and practices regarding the foods and staples they bring (and either retain or modify) from their countries of origin. Future research should also focus on the role that Latino families play in encouraging their members' emotional attachment to traditional foods vis-à-vis the reproduction of healthy/unhealthy eating practices in diverse contexts of reception.

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