

# Feeding Health: Thoughts on Healthy Food for a Healthy Planet

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[Julie Fishman] Welcome to this CDC Podcast. I'm Julie Fishman, Associate Director for Program Development at CDC's National Center for Environmental Health.

Joining me by phone today is Michael Pollan who will be discussing his March 2009 visit to CDC, what he sees as the most important challenges and opportunities for improving our nation's food system, and what possible roles the public health community might play. Mr. Pollan is the Director of the Knight Program in Science and Environmental Journalism at UC Berkeley. He is a noted, well-respected, award-winning author and his most recent books are *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, and *Food Rules: An Eater's Manual*. Mr. Pollan also wrote a New York Times letter to President-Elect Obama on the President's role as Farmer-in-Chief. Thank you for joining us today, Michael.

[Michael Pollan] You're welcome, Julie. Good to be here.

[Julie Fishman] How do you feel that people's dietary choices influence the connections between human health and environmental health?

[Michael Pollan] Well they have a, I mean, there is a very important nexus there. As it happens, usually the best choices for the environment turn out to be the best choices for health, which is kind of a lucky thing. It didn't have to be that way. So that, to the extent that people are favoring, you know, fresh food, lots of produce, they will be supporting a kind of agriculture that will be friendlier to the environment. To the extent that they're eating lots of feedlot beef and lots of processed food, processed food uses huge amounts of fossil fuel, ten calories of fossil fuel energy to produce one calorie of fast food. It is a case where you can have your cake and eat it too or your broccoli and eat it too, or whatever. And I think that that's a story, you know, that needs to be told and here again is another area where, you know, the CDC's advice on dietary matters is really very well respected and yet the public health, the kinds of public health campaigns around food that could make a real difference are not happening. Right now Michelle Obama I think is doing more work than anybody else in the government to address the problem of the American diet, from a health point of view. She's not really dealing with the environmental side of it that much, but it turns out, that by and large, it's the same, you know, the same solutions for your health will benefit the environment and that's a great thing to build on. But I think the government is really constricted its ability to put out a powerful public health message around food. I mean let's just look at the question of soda. The health impact of soda is, I mean, as anyone at the CDC on the prevention side certainly understands, is profound, but we don't have public health campaigns around soda, discouraging the consumption of soda. I think that would be incredibly controversial. I think that the industry would have tremendous problems with that and we know these public health campaigns can work. I mean, we have seen it with

cigarettes, we know how to do that advertising and we know how to affect young people with that advertising.

You know, we assume everybody understands that soda's, you know, empty calories, not good for you or that fast food is not good for you, but my own journalism suggests that that message has not reached everybody, by any means. In this movie that I participated in, "Food Inc.," there's a scene with a Latino family in California who takes their family everyday to Burger King and for fourteen dollars they can feed the family- fill up the family of four and they really can't afford fresh produce. Before they started filming, or in the process of filming, it became clear that that family didn't think of Burger King food as unhealthy and that, you know, this was good, nourishing American food, and, so there's a lot of public education to be done.

[Julie Fishman] To take this down to an individual level a little bit more, when you visited CDC and gave your lecture you gave some excellent tips that an individual could take to both improve their own food choices but also improve the food system overall. I was hoping you could share a few of those with us on this podcast.

[Michael Pollan] Sure, yeah. Well I've been working for the last couple years actually to figure out, you know, what do we know about the links between our eating and our health and what do we need to know? And I realized over time, that you didn't really, to eat well, you didn't really have to be an expert in biochemistry, you didn't need to fill your head with nutrient information or know what a, even know what an antioxidant is. So I've tried to come up with rules that will direct people toward the right nutrients without talking about nutrients and that are more kind of phrased in a cultural language or a language of whole foods. And so, for example, you know, don't eat anything your great-grandmother wouldn't recognize as food. You know, avoid the center isles of the supermarket; get most of your food from the periphery where the fresh, whole foods are. The processed foods tend to be in the center of the store. Salt and sweeten your food yourself. Don't let a chef or a corporation do it. A lot of the rules are designed to help people avoid processed foods. It may well be that the degree of processing of food is the critical determinant and as important as, you know, nutrients, good and bad. I think we really get hung up on this vocabulary of good and evil nutrients, and I don't think it actually helps that much, because as soon as you demonize a nutrient, you end up giving a free pass to another nutrient. So I think we should be careful when we're talking about nutrients, good and bad, and we're better off talking about, you know, habits of eating whole foods. Since *In Defense of Food*, where I started presenting some of these rules, I've developed a, you know, a little pamphlet of them. And I've gotten them from readers and from doctors and public health specialists, but they're all phrased in this everyday language. And I've been surprised to find how much cultural wisdom about food there is. And as, you know, people enamored with science, we tend to disregard this and tend to go right toward the scientific terms. Eat when you are hungry, not when you are bored. A couple of others- don't eat breakfast cereals that change the color of the milk. And this is one I got from some grandmothers - the whiter the bread the sooner you'll be dead.

[Julie Fishman] [laughs]

[Michael Pollan] Now, you know, this is, there's a lot of scientific wisdom behind that, but it's phrased in a way that people can really carry around with them. Eat all the junk food you want,

as long as you cook it yourself. You know French fries. We all love French fries, but they didn't become the most popular food in America, until, popular vegetable in America, until corporations made it very easy to eat them. So let's say you like French fries, well, cook 'em. Cook 'em all you want; you won't do it more than once a month 'cause it's such a pain. And cook. You know, the advice to encourage people to cook, so many good health outcomes follow from that simple act of cooking for yourself, cooking for your family. So the point is that practices matter more than biochemistry to the average eater. And that we, that's the language, I think, in which we should be speaking to people. And so I have prepared this pamphlet, which is just, you know, 60 rules and 60 paragraphs of explanations, that's it. No big science, no big history. And it's a pamphlet that I'm hoping doctors will use to give to patients and parents will give to children and vice versa and see if we can't change the way we talk about nutrition, because the way we're talking about it now is, it loses people's attention and leads to, ironically, this obsession with nutrients, does not lead to any better health outcomes on the part of the public.

[Julie Fishman] And if I can ask, is this pamphlet available yet? Or is it...

[Michael Pollan] No it's going, it'll be published in January.

[Julie] Okay.

[Michael] I'm just finishing it now.

[Julie Fishman] And you actually anticipated a question I was going to ask when you gave the French fry example and talked about our food habits. I was wondering if you could comment just a bit about your recent New York Times article about the lost art of cooking and you discussed special occasion foods and some other foods that would be a little less prevalent in our diet if we had to make them ourselves. I wondered if you could comment a bit more on how to bring cooking back into American's lives.

[Michael Pollan] Yeah, I think recreating, rebuilding a culture of everyday cooking is one of the most important things we can do to improve our health. I think the delegating of this critical human activity to corporations, to institutions, has had a really deleterious effect on our health and our happiness because generally, when industry does the cooking, they take short cuts, and the great short cuts in food are put in lots of salt, sugar, and fat and you will cover a multitude of sins in the quality of your cooking or the quality of your ingredients. And, you know, some of the most interesting research I've seen in the last few years, you know, looks at this question of is, you know, does cooking predict a healthier diet? And we have some research and we need a lot more, by the way, and that would be a great CDC project, but there is research to suggest that it does and that even poor women who cook have healthier diets than wealthy women who don't, and, you know, the usual correlation is between poor diet and low income and that the decline in home cooking has paralleled the increase in obesity in ways that you can, you know, you can make a link. So, I think it's, you know, there is a classic example, you know, cooking is just an everyday activity, this is not about science but it really is about public health. And so figuring out ways to promote cooking, I think, is a very important public health goal and that, you know, we have to take another look at Home Ec in the schools, and coming, you know, coming up with

something like Home Ec that's not as, you know, that's more gender neutral, that brings boys in, as well as girls. But I think we have an opportunity to rebuild a culture of cooking that is not sexist and that is because boys are very enamored of cooking today. And they don't, my son, I have a 17 year old son, he doesn't think of cooking as woman's work. He sees too many, you know, famous male chefs and he watches the Food Network, and the image of cooking is changing in a way that, I think, creates, you know, at least the possibility of rebuilding that culture on more equitable grounds between the sexes. That's a legitimate area for CDC to get into, explaining the health impacts of cooking and serving the family dinner and then figuring out ways to promote it.

[Julie Fishman] Michael thank you very much for taking the time to discuss these issues with us. They are vitally important to everyone's health and we truly appreciate you sharing your thoughts with us.

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