Kaylin Peterson

Childhood Obesity in Mexico: Causes, Effects, and Solutions

Mexico has beaten the United States for the highest rate of childhood obesity in the world. The rates have tripled in the past decade and now 34.4 percent of children aged from 5 to 11 years old are overweight or obese (Dommarco). It is estimated that four out of five of these children will remain overweight for the rest of their lives (Aguirre). The two main causes for the increase in the obesity rate are due to a poor diet and lack of exercise. Raising health issues like diabetes and heart disease are two effects from obesity. Policies implemented throughout the country and in schools can be solutions to obesity. Understanding the causes, effects, and solutions to obesity can help Mexico form a healthier nation.

The two main causes of obesity are simple: it’s a combination of a poor diet and a lack of exercise. Mexico hasn’t had problems with obesity in the past for a couple of reasons. In the past, Mexicans lived on the land and had to do hard, physical labor. They couldn’t afford a lot of foods high in fats and carbohydrates. Nowadays, Mexicans have a more sedentary lifestyle and high calorie foods are cheaper and more affordable (Althaus). These changes have been influenced heavily by Mexico’s trade relationship with the United States. Food consumption in Mexico has been influenced by the United States in two ways. First, the United States encourages the overproduction of calorie-dense crops, like corn. This leads to the production of large amounts of cheap, high-calorie byproducts such as corn syrup (IATP). The second influence was the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). This agreement allowed for a greater amount of trade between Mexico and the United States. This led to an increase in number of US fast food restaurants in Mexico, along with greater quantities of those cheap byproducts being sold to Mexico, which means more junk food snacks being sold to the Mexican people (T, H.). Mexican’s sedentary lifestyle is also contributing to the climbing obesity rates. 8 in 10 Mexicans over the age of 30 do not exercise at all (Althaus). In schools, the average physical education class is 40 minutes long, but is only held once a week and only 10 minutes is spent doing moderate to intense activity (Secretaria De Salud Del Distrito Federal).

The obesity problem has contributed to a plethora of health problems in Mexico. The childhood obesity rate has tripled in the past fifteen years, rising from 18.8% in 1999 to almost 35% in 2013. Health issues that have previously been only seen in adults are also starting to be seen in children as young as ten years old. 22% of children now have hypertension, which greatly raises the chance of suffering from a stroke (Aguirre). Some other health issues that are being seen in adults include diabetes, high cholesterol, kidney failure, and heart disease (UNICEF). Treating all of these health issues caused by obesity has cost Mexico $5.5 billion in expenses (Romo). Diabetes is the most prevalent of these diseases, with about 10 million Mexicans, or one in six, suffering from it (T, H.). Diabetes is the leading cause of death in adults in Mexico, claiming about 70,000 lives a year. That’s roughly the same amount of deaths caused by Mexico’s gangland wars in the past six years (Althaus). It has cost the country more money than any other disease (UNICEF).

There are many proposed solutions to the obesity problem in Mexico. Some of these include implementing a soda tax, regulating what children watch on television, creating government programs that encourage clean eating and exercise, and regulating what happens in schools. According to Mexico’s Institute for Public Health, school-aged children get at least one-fifth of their calories from sugary drinks (Romo). As of 2013, fizzy drinks have accounted for seven out of ten drinks sold in Mexico. That’s a more than 2% rise from the previous year (T,H.). In efforts to curb these numbers, Mexico’s government has implemented a soda and junk-food tax that started on January 1, 2014. These taxes charge one-peso-per-liter on not only soda, but all foods with added sugar, not including milk and yogurt. The junk-food tax charges an 8% tax on high-calorie foods. This includes any food that has 275 or more calories in 100 grams. This includes chips, candy, pudding, peanut butter, sugary cereal, and ice cream. As of 2013, Mexico’s 118 million people drank 163 liters of soda each, which is about half a liter a day. These numbers might have had something to do with the former president being the top executive for Coca-Cola (Cohen). With the implementation of the new tax, those numbers are estimated to drop to 141 liters a year, which could prevent up to 630,000 cases of diabetes by 2030 (Boseley). The tax isn’t necessarily meant to reduce consumption, but to educate the public. If this tax gets a lot of media coverage, it will encourage the public to think about unhealthy foods and their effects. The money being raised from these taxes, which is estimated to be around 3.5 billion pesos ($270 million), will be used to further solve the obesity issue by installing water fountains in schools, which encourages drinking water instead of soda even further (Cohen). Some people don’t think that a soda tax will work. Instead, they say that the government should advertise sugary and high-calorie foods as ‘killers’, similar to the way that cigarettes have been advertised. That way, people can be literally ‘scared away’ from junk food (T, H.). Propaganda like this has already been implemented. There have been images of a man without feet as a result of diabetes being displayed on billboards across Mexico City. Also displayed is an image of a can of soda next to sugar cubes, and questions if a parent would be happy giving 12 teaspoons of sugar to their child (Boseley). Another way of reducing obesity through advertising is through reducing television commercials about unhealthy foods. Federal legislators in Mexico have already announced that they will start to ban these types of advertisements during certain times of the day when many children watch television (Cohen). Other people believe that solving the obesity problem for children should start in the schools. Some ways to do this would be to monitor what children eat in school, increase the amount of time spent in physical education class every week, and to give information about eating healthy to parents so they can encourage healthy eating home as well (Aguirre). There are also government programs taking place to reduce the obesity rate. The Ministry of Health has recently started a pilot program that invested 50 million pesos in 100 public schools. This program will affect 30,000 students and will regulate what they eat through healthy school meals, encourage exercise through the construction of 250 outdoor gyms, and will monitor their health through 2 clinics that are specialized for obesity care (Mendez).

The Mexican legislation has taken many measures to reverse their obesity epidemic. Understanding the causes and effects of obesity is just the beginning to finding solutions to the problem. Reversing this problem means changing attitudes of the Mexican people, which will take a long time. Once people understand the health issues associated with obesity, they will begin to change their habits and eventually improve public health.

Sources

Aguirre, Leslie. "Obesidad Infantil En Mexico Se Triplica; Ninos Presentan Hipertension." *Publimetro*. N.p., 19 Mar. 2013. Web. 13 Apr. 2014.

Althaus, Dudley. "How Mexico Got so Fat." *GlobalPost*. N.p., 8 July 2013. Web. 13 Apr. 2014

Boseley, Sarah. "Mexico Enacts Soda Tax in Effort to Combat World's Highest Obesity Rate." *Theguardian.com*. Guardian News and Media, 16 Jan. 2014. Web. 13 Apr. 2014.

Cohen, Larry. "New Soda Tax Makes Mexico a Leading Guardian of Public Health." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 22 Nov. 2013. Web. 13 Apr. 2014.

Dommarco, Juan R. "Childhood Obesity in Mexico: Trends, Programs and Policies." INSP, n.d. Web. 13 Apr. 2014.

IATP (Institution for Agriculture and Trade Policy). "Obesity-an American Export?" *How U.S. Policies Impact Mexico*. N.p., 7 May 2012. Web. 13 Apr. 2014.

Mendez, Ana C. "Milenio.com | CD. De México." Milenio. N.p., 8 Mar. 2013. Web. 13 Apr. 2014.

Romo, Rafael. "Mexico's Other Enemy: Obesity Rates Triple in Last 3 Decades." *CNN*. Cable News Network, 04 Jan. 2011. Web. 13 Apr. 2014.

Secretaria De Salud Del Distrito Federal. "Programa Muévete Y Métete En Cintura."*Muévete Y Métete En Cintura*. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 Apr. 2014.

T, H. "Eating Themselves to Death." *The Economist*. The Economist Newspaper, n.d. Web. 10 Apr. 2014.

UNICEF. "Salud Y Nutrición." *UNICEF México*. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 Apr. 2014.