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Americans and Europeans Want Tougher Action on Childhood Obesity and Diet-Related Disease

(Center for Science in the Public Interest) Eighty-two percent of Americans believe that food companies should do more to reduce the fat, sugar, and salt in their products, 78 percent want fast-food and other chain restaurants to disclose calories and key nutrition information on menus and menu boards, and just 36 percent of Americans think that food companies are doing enough to limit junk food advertising to children, according to new survey research released today.



The poll, conducted by the Opinion Research Corporation, was commissioned by the Transatlantic Consumer Dialogue, a consultative forum of American and European consumer advocacy organizations that represent consumer interests to E.U. and U.S. policy makers. The Center for Science in the Public Interest co-chairs the TACD's food policy group.

Strong majorities in the U.S., U.K., Spain, and Hungary think governments should take more action to help deal with childhood obesity and other diet-related health problems. Fifty-seven percent of Americans said government should be taking more action. Public opinion in Europe was even stronger. Sixty-eight percent of consumers in the U.K. want their government to take more action to deal with childhood obesity, as do 76 percent of respondents in Spain and 61 percent in Hungary.

The poll comes as consumer organizations belonging to the TACD are poised to meet next week in Washington with U.S. and E.U. government officials and leading nutrition experts at the Generation Excess conference on combating obesity and diet-related disease. Journalists who wish to attend the conference on April 8 may register online.

"U.S. based food companies are complying with government initiatives in Europe that curb junk food advertising to kids, limit fat and salt content in processed foods, and call for nutrition information on the fronts of food packages, but are opposing such steps in the U.S.— in effect treating European consumers better than Americans" said Bruce Silverglade, legal affairs director for CSPI.

One reason for the discrepancy is that the Food and Drug Administration, the Federal Trade Commission, and other U.S. agencies are much less aggressive than their European counterparts. Last year, the U.K. cracked down on television advertising of junk foods on TV programs appealing to children, but in the U.S., the FTC has opted for self-regulation based on a weak set of industry-written nutrition standards. The world's largest food company, Nestlé, complies with the British advertising curbs but does not even participate in the latest U.S. self-regulatory initiative by the food industry. While the U.K. and France set targeted reductions for the salt content of processed foods, and Denmark phased out use of artificial trans fats, the FDA has remained on the sidelines, according to CSPI.

"The Food and Drug Administration has lost its leadership role and we are falling behind other countries that are taking more aggressive steps to combat childhood obesity and diet-related disease," Silverglade said. "The health of Americans will suffer as a result."

About three-quarters of Americans favor front-of-package nutrition symbols signifying whether a food is high, medium, or low in calories, fat, sugar, or salt. Such symbols have been developed in the U.K., where red,

yellow, or green traffic-light symbols convey that information. A panel at next week's conference will discuss how to provide consumers with that kind of nutrition information, and will include officials from the FDA, the British Food Standards Agency, the European Commission, and a representative from the Maine-based Hannaford supermarket chain, which awards one, two, or three stars to healthier products based on their nutritional makeup.

"Rates of obesity and diet-related disease remain high, but governments aren't acting with enough urgency to shield children from junk-food advertising, or to give consumers better nutrition information," said Sue Davies, E.U. co-chair of TACD's food policy group. "Clearly, relying on voluntary action by the food industry isn't working."

The poll's findings are based on telephone surveys with 1,003 individuals each in the U.S., Great Britain, and Spain, with a margin of error of 3 percent and a 95 percent confidence level. Data from Hungary was collected from a representative sample of 1,058 individuals in face-to-face interviews.