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Dr. Brian Elbel on Changing America's Eating Habits at the World Science Festival

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In America, farm-to-table restaurants, paleo diets, and juice cleanses thrive in the country of Big Gulps, super sizes, and the Baconator. In this paradoxical food landscape, how can we promote healthy eating and lower the alarming obesity rate—now an issue for all demographics and regions of the country?

That was the subject of a lively discussion among experts on food, health, and obesity at “[Science Kitchen: Hard to Swallow](#),” on Sunday, May 31, at the World Science Festival. Brian Elbel, PhD, MPH, associate professor of population health and health policy at NYULMC and NYU Wagner was among the panelists. The discussion focused on how Americans make food choices, with Dr. Elbel lending perspective from his behavioral health and economics research into the impact of policies like calorie labeling and beverage size limits.



Dr. Brian Elbel, pictured far left, participated in a panel discussion at the World Science Festival.

In New York City, which acts as Dr. Elbel's research laboratory, the record is mixed. He has found that [calorie counts posted in chain restaurants did not lead to any kind of meaningful change in the food people purchased](#). However, in a micro-experiment in which he and his team set up a bodega in Bellevue Hospital, people bought less junk food when they saw labels stating plainly that the products were unhealthy. Higher prices on junk food also deterred them, suggesting a tax could be effective.

In [another study](#), Dr. Elbel and his team found that building a supermarket in a “food desert”—an area of the city where fresh food is sparsely available—did not lead people to make healthier purchases. The study has ramifications for New York City and other localities that have been implementing a policy of ensuring healthy foods are widely available.

Flipping the Message

One significant challenge to healthy eating is counteracting the heavy marketing and engineering by the food and beverage industries, which are especially influential on children. According to another panelist, Pulitzer Prize winning New York Times journalist and author Michael Moss, the food industry has over the years used high quantities of salt, sugar, and fat to make products that are both low-cost and “utterly irresistible” to consumers. Most kids on a sweet diet (think cookies and juice), find it harder to like the taste of vegetables, he said.

What's more, kids see thousands of ads every year for food, almost all of which are for unhealthy foods, Dr. Elbel added. Government efforts to promote health and nutrition guidelines are neither as well-funded nor as effective. For this reason, the government may need to think about engaging corporations that already have a robust and influential marketing presence to help spread healthy messages, Dr. Elbel said, adding that this approach is controversial in the

policy world. By way of example, he played a dramatic advertisement by Nike that features kids saying what they would do if they could live an extra five years of life—the number of years they are statistically expected to lose compared to their parents’ generation as a result of obesity.

Considering the mixed results of his research, Dr. Elbel said, no one policy is going to solve the obesity problem. “You have to think of these policies in a combination together to chip away at things,” he said.

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