

Nutrition is at mercy of marketing

KAREN MILTNER

STAFF WRITER

When Marion Nestle first started studying nutrition, it never dawned on her that she would also have to bone up on food policy, politics and marketing.

But as she discussed in a lecture at the University of Rochester titled "What to Eat: Personal vs. Social Responsibility," the number of overweight kids has doubled since the 1970s, in step with a farm policy that, in her opinion, subsidizes farmers to produce an overabundance of food.

The subsidies combine, she says, with a food industry that sells highly processed, nutritionally questionable foods at artificially cheap prices, and shareholders who demand higher returns on their investments, pressuring companies to sell more food regardless of the health conse-

quences.

The result has been an industry that continuously increases portion sizes and spends billions marketing to children.



Marion Nestle

"I do think (personal responsibility) has something to do with it, but it's difficult in a social environment where eating too much is the norm," says Nestle, professor at New York University's Department of Nutrition, Food Studies and Public Health. She is the author of *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* (University of California Press, \$16.95) and *What to Eat* (North Point Press, \$16).

Nestle spoke Wednesday morning at the UR Medical Center as part of the eighth annual Dr. Anne E. Dyson Memorial Grand Rounds and Child Advocacy Forum, presented by the Pediatric Links with the Community

program.

Kid-oriented marketing is manifested in many ways, including cartoon images on packages, kid-oriented TV commercials and interactive Web sites.

Companies target kids in order to build brand loyalty, Nestle says. They also want kids to pester their parents to buy these products, which in essence creates a separate category of foods that are just for kids.

"I think this is so subversive around issues of parental authority. When you hear parents say, 'My kids only eat chicken fingers,' that is kids' marketing at work," she says.

Nestle's PowerPoint presentation included an image of Cheez-It crackers with a SpongeBob SquarePants cartoon on the front, along with the Kellogg Co.'s 2006 marketing budget of \$24 million for the product.

Nestle also showed examples of children's food marketing she en-

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countered abroad, from Ronald McDonald striking a namaste greeting pose in Thailand to a sugary breakfast cereal in India claiming that the product was the equivalent of the more indigenous breakfast of whole wheat chapatis and milk.

Since the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act of 1990, Nestle also warns against food labels cluttered with health claims (such as heart healthy),

as they could also contain ingredients that are not necessarily good for you.

Nestle insists you don't have to be a genius to eat healthfully. Her advice is simply this: Eat less, move more, eat plenty of fruits and vegetables, and don't eat too much junk food.

When you are in the supermarket, shop mostly the perimeter of the store where the more nutrient-dense

foods are found, and avoid products with cartoons and health claims and long lists of ingredients you can't pronounce.

Keeping soda and junk food out of the house and modeling good eating habits at home are the best ways parents can instill the same in their children, Nestle adds. But it also doesn't hurt to teach kids to be wary of target

marketing. □

KMILTNER@DemocratandChronicle.com

