

# What's with this obsession with

# JUNK FOOD

By Fiona McCaw (McGill Daily)

**S**itting on grocery store shelves, carefully packaged boxes invite the consumer to look closer and investigate, especially if the viewer happens to be a child. Stuff that has absolutely no perceivable nutritional value. That's what junk food is all about.

Behind the scenes in the junk food industry is a huge staff of researchers, technicians and engineers whose jobs depend on sales. Their hard work shows in the package design, and the design of the mass produced product itself. That they can make so much of this stuff to bring to the marketplace is a technological and logistical miracle. Millions buy it and eat it every day. And it tastes like sweetened styrofoam.

To investigate this enigma, I selected a number of these "food" items and consulted three experts: Rejeanne Gougeon, a nutritionist from the Nutrition and Food Science Centre at Montreal's Royal Victoria Hospital; Ann Hale, a professor of marketing at McGill's Faculty of Management; and professor Tom Naylor, a McGill economist.

The products we chose had several things in common: they were all made by well-known brand-name manufacturers, had a certain amount of advertising behind them, and were directed mainly at children. They also lacked any obvious nutritional value. They were: Froot Loops cereal by Kellogg's; Alpha-bits cereal by Post; Quaker Chewy Stripes granola bars with Peanut Butter 'n' Grape; Quaker Chewy Granola Bars with Chocolate Chips, Graham and Marshmallows; Mini Oreos, Chocolatey covered Oreos, and Oreos Double Stuff by Nabisco; and Mini Rain-bow Chips A-hoy cookies.

## Nutrition and Junk Food

But just because there was no obvious nutritional value didn't mean there wasn't some somewhere. There had to be a reason for these products to exist. So I put them all in two shopping bags and trudged up the hill to visit Gougeon.

Gougeon laughed when she first saw me coming with my bags of "food". Bad news for my hidden nutritional value hypothesis. Gougeon perused the boxes of Froot Loops and Alpha Bits.

"The way I see it, these foods are sold to make kids drink milk. In reality it is a snack," she said.

Gougeon explained that a recent study revealed that most children ate these cereals directly from the box.

"If people treat it as a snack then it is displacing candies and other kinds of snacks and that isn't so bad," said Gougeon. "If it's displacing a better breakfast, then it's junk."

High in sugar and low in protein and with negligible amounts of fibre, both cereals had very little nutritional value for the number of calories they had. Gougeon said that the cereals' claim to be sources of essential nutrients (seven

in the case of Froot Loops and nine in the case of Alpha Bits) did not mean either cereal was nutritious.

Both cereals were fortified with iron, an essential nutrient. But Gougeon said that just because the iron was there, that didn't mean it could do any good, because it was bound in a compound the body could not absorb very well.

"If it's not included in an animal source of iron, or vitamin C isn't present, then it isn't helping to give you iron."

Gougeon also had a low opinion of the nutritional value of the granola bars, noting their high sugar and fat content.

"People think these are healthy because they are granola," she said. "But they are not nutrient rich, and they are not packaged as candies. The ingredients are OK -- the problem is just that they are replacing more healthy foods."

All of the products, except the Chocolatey covered Oreos, had nutritional information listed on the sides of the boxes. Gougeon said the recommended portion sizes were too large, having 200 calories to a portion.

The estimated daily calorie intake is 1800 calories for children aged four to six, and 2000 calories for children aged seven to ten.

"Considering the life style of a child, the concern is that we make food choices that are nutrient dense," said Gougeon.

According to Gougeon, all of these sugar-rich foods would not be particularly harmful if children had an active lifestyle with a lot of exercise, but unfortunately most children are quite sedentary.

"These foods are more appropriate in the context of action that requires a lot of energy," she said. "But many children do not participate in such activities, and in that setting this food is not appropriate at all."

Gougeon added that if children ate a lot of this food they would be left with habits that would be harmful to them in adulthood.

"We have to educate people's taste buds," she said. "Otherwise adults will continue this lifestyle."

So the hidden nutritional value hypothesis of the existence of these foods proved false. Indeed, if nutrition were a factor, these foods

would be taken off the shelf immediately.

"As long as the food industry puts out this stuff nutritionists have a job," said Gougeon. "Which is nice for nutritionists, but it's not good for anybody else."

So what is the answer then? Is it some sort of conspiracy of nutritionists to preserve their jobs?

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