AAP Conference Preview: Plenary speaker calls processed food an experiment that failed
by Carla Kemp, Senior Editor

Editor's note: For more on educational sessions and events at the 2016 AAP National Conference & Exhibition in San Francisco, read the preview issue of AAP News Today. To register for the conference, visit http://aapexperience.org/conference-registration/.

You know processed food is bad for kids, but if you want to know just how bad, ask Robert Lustig, M.D., M.S.L., professor of pediatrics in the Division of Endocrinology at University of California, San Francisco.

Dr. Lustig lists 11 things wrong with processed food: It has too little fiber, micronutrients and omega-3 fatty acids, and too many additives, alcohol, branched-chain amino acids, nitrates, omega-6 fatty acids, salt, sugar and trans fats.

"The big kahuna, the one that blows everything out of the water, is too much sugar," he said.

Dr. Lustig will detail the ill effects of processed food, and sugar in particular, during a plenary address titled "Processed Food: an Experiment That Failed (P3080)" from 10:50-11:10 a.m. Oct. 24 at the AAP National Conference & Exhibition in San Francisco.

By changing our food supply for palatability, cost and convenience, the food industry has taken out the things that kept us healthy and put in things that make us unhealthy, Dr. Lustig said.

Sugar is the marker of processed food, he said, because it's the cheapest of the ingredients used and it's in most processed foods.

When Dr. Lustig spoke at the 2009 AAP National Conference on the role of fructose in obesity and metabolic syndrome, prospective correlational data linked sugar to disease.

"We now have causative data in humans that routine levels of sugar consumption … cause chronic metabolic disease, including heart disease, fatty liver disease, type 2 diabetes and tooth decay. We have causation for all four."

Type 2 diabetes and fatty liver disease are now epidemic in children.

"These were the diseases of alcohol. Alcoholics got type 2 diabetes. Alcoholics got fatty liver disease. Now children get type 2 diabetes and fatty liver disease. But they don't drink alcohol," said Dr. Lustig.

But children consume sugar.

"And because sugar is metabolized the same way as alcohol and because they are consuming so much because it's in all the food, they're now getting these diseases as well. They are getting the disease of alcohol without alcohol," he said.

So why do people continue to consume sugar even if they know it's bad for them?

Because it's addictive, just like alcohol, Dr. Lustig said.

"That's the definition of a substance of abuse - you can know that whatever it is that you're addicted to is ruining your life and ruining your family, and you can't do anything about it."
When doctors talk about sugar, they focus on how it is empty calories, he continued.

"No, sugar's bad not because they're empty calories. Sugar is bad because they're toxic calories."

He will conclude his presentation with five societal recommendations that pediatricians also can enact. One is to prohibit beverages with added sugars in hospitals.

"Hospitals were the first places to ban smoking," he said. "We have to role model for the rest of society. If we show people that we think this is a bad thing, maybe they'll think, maybe this is a bad thing."

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