

Junk Food Companies Responsible for COVID-19 Susceptibility



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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Processed foods, junk foods, and soft drinks are key culprits in the rise of obesity and chronic diseases that have a key role to play in COVID-19 deaths
- Even in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, multinational food and beverage corporations are interfering with public policy and influencing the development of dietary guidelines

- More than half of those appointed to the 2020 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DGAC) has ties to the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI), a junk food industry front group
- Junk food giants are thoroughly intertwined with public health recommendations pertaining to food and nutrition – to the detriment of public health
- Eating nutritious foods could help you lose weight, but Type 2 diabetes into remission and improve your health considerably, so you'll have a much better chance of survival should you contract COVID-19

Underlying health conditions like obesity, heart disease, and diabetes have emerged as key factors in fatalities due to novel coronavirus, COVID-19. In one study, more than 99% of COVID-19 fatalities occurred among people who had underlying medical conditions.^{1,2}

Among the fatalities, 76.1% had high blood pressure, 35.5% had diabetes and 33% had heart disease.³ What's more, another study revealed that among 18- to 49-year-olds hospitalized due to COVID-19, obesity was the most prevalent underlying condition, just ahead of hypertension.⁴ Chronic conditions like Type 2 diabetes, heart disease and obesity have a lot in common, including the fact that they're often fueled by poor diet. Hence we need to [improve our relationship with food](#).

Processed foods, junk foods, and soft drinks are key culprits in the rise of such chronic diseases, and therefore have a key role to play in COVID-19 deaths. Yet, even in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, multinational food, and beverage corporations are interfering with public policy and influencing the development of dietary guidelines.

In order to protect public health, this conflicted influence must be curbed, according to a report published by the campaign group Corporate Accountability.⁵ Meanwhile, health

experts are calling out ultra-processed foods as key players in COVID-19 deaths and calling on public health guidelines to warn the public of their risks.⁶

Junk Food Giants Stymying Public Nutrition Policies

According to Corporate Accountability's report, more than half of those appointed to the 2020 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DGAC) has ties to the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI), a not-for-profit organization established by a Coca-Cola executive 40 years ago.⁷

DGAC is supposed to be an independent committee, which reviews scientific evidence and provides a report to help develop the next set of dietary guidelines for Americans (2020 to 2025). However, its extensive ties to ILSI all but ensures the committee is anything but independent.

ILSI has been exposed as a [shill for the junk food industry](#), and internal documents have revealed ILSI embedded itself in public health panels across Europe and the United Nations in an effort to promote its own industry-focused agenda to raise profits at the expense of public health worldwide.⁸

The Corporate Accountability report further examined ILSI's "revolving doors and conflicts of interest" with critical government policy processes, including not only formulating the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) but also updating national food composition databases. It explains:⁹

"The report also chronicles the front group's deep connections with industry, its ties to research it has helped produce, and to individuals it has relationships with. The picture it paints makes a compelling case for Big Food to abandon ILSI and similar front groups in the interest not

only of public health, but also a less deceitful relationship with its investors.”

DGA is essentially the go-to source for nutrition advice in the U.S., directing what more than 30 million U.S. schoolchildren eat at school and driving the nutritional advice given to new mothers, seniors, veterans, and other beneficiaries of nutritional education and meals offered by the federal government.

“But the DGA’s mandate is even broader,” Corporate Accountability noted in their report. “It aims to promote health, prevent chronic disease, and help all U.S. residents reach and maintain a healthy weight.”¹⁰ Yet, by partnering with junk food corporations, it ends up doing the opposite:¹¹

“Seventy-five percent of the individuals involved in formulating the U.S. government’s official dietary guidance have food industry ties. Fifty-five percent have ties to ILSI, which was founded by a former Coca-Cola executive and is funded by Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, McDonald’s, General Mills, Cargill, Monsanto, the National Dairy Council, the International Tree Nut Council and a host of other global purveyors of junk food and drink.”

Junk Food Corporations Control Academia, Nutrition Guidelines

The Corporate Accountability report presents several key findings that highlight ILSI’s concerning ties with industry, and how its research, government interference, and other activities are negatively affecting public health policy.

Among them:¹²

ILSI's journal, Nutrition Reviews, does not always disclose ILSI affiliations and conflicts of interest. Further, nearly 40% of ILSI North America's publications from 2013 to 2017 received support or funding from ILSI but did not disclose it. Of the approximately 60% of publications that did contain a disclosure statement, "no conflict of interest" was still sometimes declared

The DGAC chairs and vice-chairs of the Pregnancy and Lactation Subcommittee are affiliated with ILSI

ILSI claims that it doesn't lobby, but it gave direct guidance to the Argentine government regarding updates to its National Food Composition Database

ILSI India produced a study in partnership with government research institutions that disparaged and misrepresented health effects of traditional foods instead of focusing on the adverse [health effects of soda and processed foods](#)

ILSI North America's board of trustees violates Principle 1 of its conflict of interest policy, as more than 50% of its board holds an affiliation with the private sector

Rather than dismantling ILSI Mexico after it violated the group's code of ethics under a Coca-Cola executive's leadership, it was absorbed by ILSI Mesoamerica in 2019, which is also under the leadership of a Coca-Cola executive

One example given of lack of disclosures in Nutrition Reviews was a 2017 review titled "What is the Appropriate Upper Limit for Added Sugars Consumption?"¹³

The researchers looked into the "significant restrictions on upper limits of sugars consumption" put forth by scientific organizations like the World Health Organization and American Heart Association, concluding that their findings "should inject a note of caution into restrictive guidelines" and noting that "the scientific basis for restrictive guidelines is far from settled."¹⁴

One of the review's co-authors, however, failed to disclose an important conflict of interest. James Rippe was affiliated with ILSI Mexico, leading a forum titled "Current Evidence on Sweeteners and Health," which received \$10 million in funding from the U.S. Corn Refiners Association to establish that [sugar consumption](#) had no impact on heart health.¹⁵

Another glaring example was published in the Annals of Internal Medicine. The study, "The Scientific Basis of Guideline Recommendations on Sugar Intake," was funded by ILSI and concluded, "Guidelines on dietary sugar do not meet criteria for trustworthy recommendations and are based on low-quality evidence. Public health officials (when promulgating these recommendations) and their public audience (when considering dietary behavior) should be aware of these limitations."¹⁶

Although the journal did reveal that ILSI was the primary funding source for the study, according to Corporate Accountability:¹⁷

"Its findings were so self-serving, it prompted criticism from candy-maker Mars (then an ILSI member). Co-author, and 2010 DGAC member, Joanne Slavin did not disclose her financial ties with Big Food and Beverage, including Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, and Nestlé."

Report: Governments, Academics Should Part Ways With ILSI

ILSI has been a key piece in how the [junk food industry](#) has grown and expanded globally, giving the junk food industry an in with policymakers and prestigious universities under the guise of scientific advancement.

While funding scientific research designed to support its own

agenda, ILSI regularly fails to disclose conflicts of interest. “This lack of transparency has allowed industry’s ILSI a social license to produce and promote junk science the world over,” the report notes.¹⁸ Meanwhile, while claiming to be a non-lobbying organization, they play a role in policymaking processes regarding nutrition in the U.S., India, Argentina, Mexico, and Taiwan.

Now that ILSI is being exposed, even junk food giants themselves, namely Mars and Nestlé, have cut ties with the organization. Corporate Accountability is calling on other corporations to do the same and demands academic institutions to sever all ties with ILSI, including ILSI Research Foundation and ILSI’s Nutrition Reviews.

For governments, the report recommends prohibiting those with ties to ILSI from participating on the DGAC and publically disclosing direct interactions with ILSI with agencies such as the USDA, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, US. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.¹⁹

As it stands, however, junk food giants are thoroughly intertwined with public health recommendations pertaining to food and nutrition – to the detriment of public health. “Even in times of crisis, such as today’s [COVID-19 pandemic](#), ILSI’s backers feel no scruples lobbying for the bottom line,” Corporate Accountability stated, adding:²⁰

“In India, despite potential consequences to the health and well-being of workers and the community, corporations including Coca-Cola, PepsiCo and Nestlé, have submitted letters to the government requesting food and beverage manufacturing be exempt from the lockdown, and be considered an ‘essential service.’

Not providing immune-suppressing sugar-sweetened beverages

during this time may also prove the more essential service these corporations can provide in this time and beyond.”

How Americans Got Hooked on Processed Foods

According to investigative reporter Michael Moss, much of the responsibility for Americans' increased [consumption of junk food](#) lies with the processed food industry. In addition to targeting kids who are “especially hardwired for sweet taste,” sugar, salt, and unhealthy fats are the top three substances making processed foods so addictive.

Moss' four-year investigation culminated in the book “Salt Sugar Fat,” which details how food scientists formulate products with just the right combination of sugar, fat, and salt to pique your taste buds just enough, without overwhelming them, thereby overriding your brain's inclination to say “enough.” He uses the example of potato chips, which combine salt and fat for instantaneous pleasure, along with the sugar in the starch of the potato itself, as the perfect addictive food.

Beyond the addictive potential of the foods is marketing, which further entices Americans to buy and consume more processed foods. This includes things like positioning junk foods at eye level on grocery store displays. In an interview with U.S. News & World Report, Moss revealed the food industry secrets that are most surprising, including that food execs may avoid junk food for the sake of their own health:²¹

“One, on a personal level, many food company executives don't eat their own products for health reasons. And two, the companies themselves are more hooked on salt, sugar and fat than we are because they're miracle ingredients that enable them to preserve and keep the products low cost along with

being utterly tasty. The depth of the industry's own dependence was really surprising to me."

Junk Food Causing Increased COVID-19 Deaths

London-based cardiologist Dr. Aseem Malhotra is among those warning that poor diet can increase your risk of dying from COVID-19. He tweeted, "The government and public health England are ignorant and grossly negligent for not telling the public they need to change their diet now."²²

He told BBC that ultra-processed foods make up more than half the calories consumed by the British, and if you suffer from [obesity](#), [Type 2 diabetes](#) and [high blood pressure](#) – all of which are linked to poor diet – your risk of mortality from COVID-19 increases tenfold.

On the brighter side, he also states that eating nutritious foods for even one month could help you lose weight, but Type 2 diabetes into remission and improve your health considerably, so you'll have a much better chance of survival should you contract COVID-19.²³ Malhotra also told the food industry to "stop mass-marketing and selling ultra-processed food."

Dr. Robert Lustig, Emeritus Professor of Pediatrics in the division of endocrinology at the University of California, San Francisco, further stated:

"I've heard COVID-19 referred to a beast, because it doesn't distinguish. In point of fact, it doesn't distinguish who it infects. But it does distinguish who it kills. Other than the elderly, it's those who are Black, obese, and/or have pre-existing conditions. What distinguished these three demographics?"

Ultra-processed food. Because ultra-processed food sets you up for inflammation, which COVID-19 is happy to exploit. Just another way processed food kills. Time to rethink your menu.”

If you're interested in eating better, I recommend adopting a [cyclical ketogenic diet](#), which involves radically limiting carbs (replacing them with healthy fats and moderate amounts of protein) until you're close to or at your ideal weight, ultimately allowing your body to burn fat – not carbohydrates – as its primary fuel.

This includes avoiding all [ultra-processed foods](#) and also limiting added sugars to a maximum of 25 grams per day (15 grams a day if you're insulin resistant or diabetic). This will improve your health in multiple ways and in so doing you may significantly reduce your risk of becoming seriously ill from COVID-19.