

# Soft Drinks and Obesity – Global Threats to Diet and Health

*“Our Achilles heel is the discussion about obesity. It's gone from a small, manageable U.S. issue to a huge global issue. It dilutes our marketing and works against it. It's a huge, huge issue.”*

*Coca Cola Company Chief Creative Officer - Ms. Esther Lee, April 23, 2007<sup>1</sup>*

Obesity, which often begins in childhood,<sup>2</sup> increases the risk of heart disease, diabetes, and other serious illnesses.<sup>3</sup> As the rates of overweight and obesity increase, the prevalence of diet related diseases increase as well. Increased consumption of carbonated and noncarbonated soft drinks is a major contributor to overweight and obesity.<sup>4</sup>

Once a problem primarily in the United States (US) and Europe, obesity has become widespread. According to the World Health Organization, many less-developed countries now face a “double-burden” of malnutrition and obesity. The burgeoning need for public health resources to address diseases related to over-nutrition can strain the budgets of countries also struggling with widespread under-nutrition.

Less developed countries represent the largest growth markets for soft drink producers<sup>5</sup> as consumption has leveled off, or slightly declined, in the US and parts of Europe. Not surprisingly, consumers in countries such as Mexico, Egypt, and China are being targeted by the soft drink industry with aggressive marketing campaigns, sometimes aimed at children and youth.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Advertising Age, "Obesity Fear Frenzy Grips Industry" quoting Coca Cola Chief Creative Officer, Ms. Esther Lee, April 23, 2007.

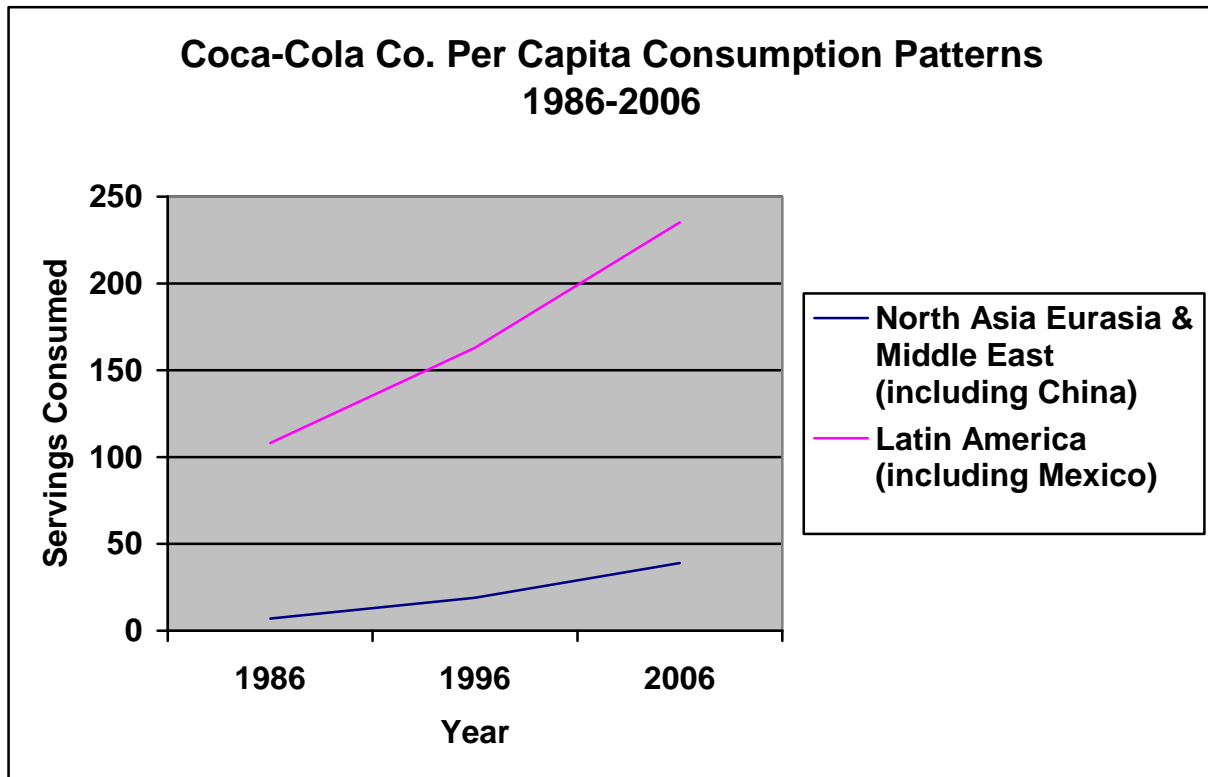
<sup>2</sup> Popkin, Barry, Gordon-Larsen, P. The Nutrition Transition: Worldwide Obesity Dynamics and Their Determinants, *International Journal of Obesity* (2004), pg. S8.

<sup>3</sup> World Health Organization. Technical Report 916, Diet, Nutrition and the Prevention of Chronic Disease, (2004).

<sup>4</sup> See Ludwig, DS, Peterson, KE, and Gortmaker, SL. Relation Between Consumption of Sugar-Sweetened Drinks and Childhood Obesity: a Prospective, Observational Analysis. *Lancet*. 2001; 357: 505-508; James, J, Thomas, P, Cavan, D, and Kerr, D. Preventing Childhood Obesity by Reducing Consumption of Carbonated Drinks: Cluster Randomised Controlled Trial. *British Medical Journal*. April 2004; Vol. 328; Malik, V, Schulze, MB, and Hu, FB. Intake of Sugar-Sweetened Beverages and Weight Gain: A Systematic Review. *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*. 2006; 84: 274-288; Ebbeling, CB, Feldman, HA, Osganian, SK, Chomitz, VR, Ellenbogen, SJ, Ludwig, DS. Effects of Decreasing Sugar-Sweetened Beverage Consumption on Body Weight in Adolescents: A Randomized, Controlled Pilot Study. *Pediatrics*. 2006; 117: 673-680; Popkin, B. and S.J. Nielson. The Sweetening of the World's Diet. *Obesity Research*. 2003; Vol. 11, No. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Hawkes, *supra* n. 4

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*



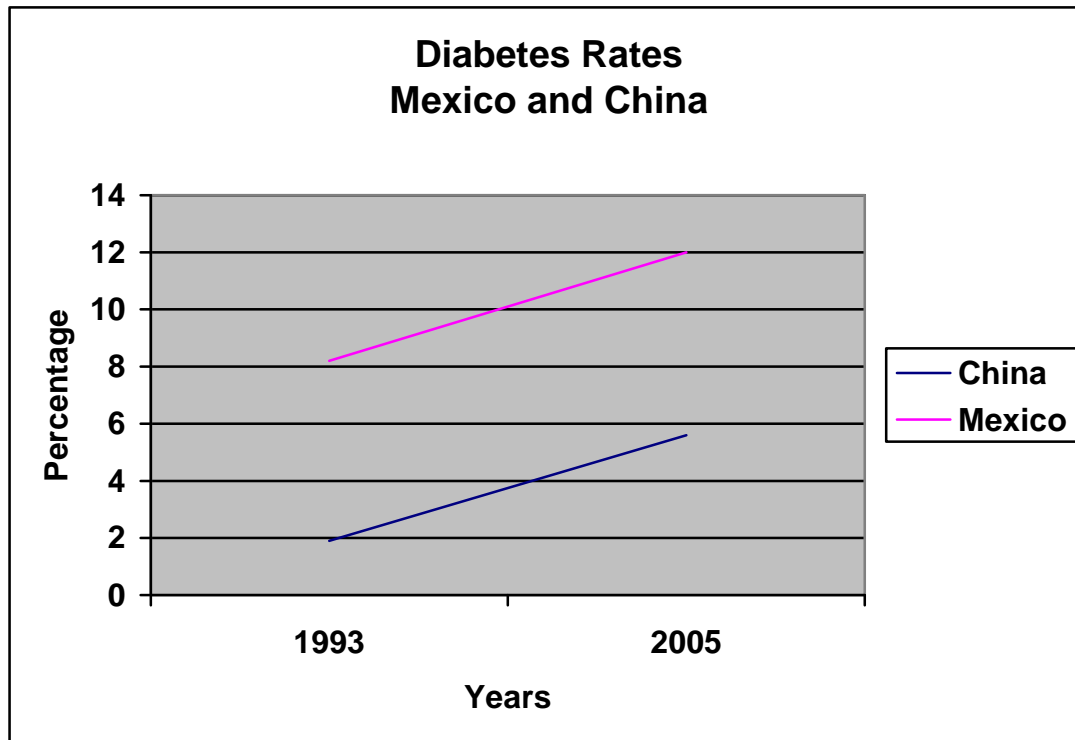
Such countries are undergoing what public health scholars refer to as a “nutrition transition.” This phrase reflects the idea that “modern societies seem to be converging on a diet high in saturated fats, sugar, and refined foods but low in fiber – often termed the ‘Western diet’ – and on lifestyles characterized by lower levels of activity.”<sup>7</sup> Increases in soft drink consumption contribute to this problem.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Popkin, BM and P Gordon-Larsen. The Nutrition Transition: Worldwide Obesity Dynamics and Their Determinants. *International Journal of Obesity*. 2004: Vol. 28, S2-S9.

<sup>8</sup> Vartanian, Lenny, Schwartz, M., and Brownell, K. Effects of Soft Drink Consumption on Nutrition and Health: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis, *American Journal of Public Health*, April 2007, Vol. 97, No. 4.

**As consumption of soft drinks has increased in Mexico and China, so has the prevalence of obesity and diabetes.**



In sum, the prevalence of overweight and obesity is no longer just an American problem. Obesity is a global epidemic, and in some regions, “is already equal or greater than in the US.”<sup>9</sup> Increases in obesity and overweight are leading to increases in diet-related diseases and mortality in developing countries. The soft drink industry is playing a significant role in these trends by targeting developing countries with aggressive marketing campaigns, helping create the ill-fated “nutrition transition” that has already plagued the US and Europe.

---

<sup>9</sup> Popkin, BM. The Nutrition Transition in the Developing World. *Development Policy Review*. 2003: Vol. 21 (5-6), pg. 590.