

OPINION  
GUEST ESSAY

# It's Not You. It's the Food.



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**By Julia Belluz and Kevin Hall**

Ms. Belluz, a journalist, and Dr. Hall, a scientist, are the authors of the forthcoming book “Food Intelligence.”

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Over the past couple of decades, the two of us have explored a central mystery about human health.

For Kevin, a former National Institutes of Health nutrition scientist, the question was why no particular diet seemed to have a meaningful impact on body fat. For Julia, a journalist, it was personal: Why had she, like so many others, struggled with body weight?

When Kevin started his lab at the N.I.H. in 2003, low-carb diets were surging in popularity as carbs were widely blamed for obesity. He spent more than a decade running rigorous studies comparing the effects of diets varying widely in macronutrients — low-carb, low-fat — only to find that none had any great edge for losing body fat.

Julia unwittingly conducted an experiment of her own, trying — and failing — to lose weight with just about every imaginable wellness gimmick. Searching for answers through her reporting, she spent a night in a so-called metabolic chamber and had her genes analyzed. Neither test result could explain why she had been a chubby kid and was a chunky adult.

We had both assumed the mystery of obesity would be solved through a better understanding of individual biology and each person finding the right diet for him or her. We were not the only ones. If you are interested in health and wellness, your social media feed is probably flooded with such advice — influencers spouting tips on protocols and products that promise to optimize your individual health.

Such advice has won the backing of Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who

makes valid critiques of the state of America's health while promoting wearable health devices to help people "take responsibility" and promising to free Americans from the Food and Drug Administration's "aggressive suppression" of vitamin supplements, which he views as a key part of a healthy lifestyle.

Calley Means, a top aide to Mr. Kennedy, co-founded Truemed, which helps consumers to use tax-free funds from their health savings accounts for the purchase of such wellness products. Dr. Casey Means, his sister, a physician and Mr. Kennedy's pick for surgeon general, also promotes supplements and sells continuous glucose monitors to track the body's sugar fluctuations.

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After we wrote a book on what shapes eating behavior, we now know that these individual wellness fixes are a trillion-dollar distraction from addressing the root cause of America's chronic disease crisis: our toxic food environment.





Photo Illustration by Vicente Cayuela Aliaga for The New York Times

The Trump administration seems to agree to an extent. On Tuesday, Mr. Kennedy released a new report from the Make America Healthy Again commission, which correctly identified the rise in diet-related chronic disease as being driven by a food environment that is increasingly composed of highly processed foods. But instead of suggesting policies for reducing their consumption, the report makes vague recommendations. When it comes to ultraprocessed foods, it says only that the government will “continue efforts to develop” a definition for them and will recommend reducing consumption of highly processed foods in forthcoming dietary guidelines that Americans have traditionally struggled to follow. That doesn’t go far enough.

If large swaths of the population were being sickened by a poison released from an industrial plant, no one would suggest that the solution is to just offer home filters, wearables and supplements. The only real path to restoring health would have to include mandating the removal of the poison from the environment.

The science on this is surprisingly clear, as Kevin’s research has shown. A few years ago, he became interested in investigating different food environments — how the physical, economic, social and cultural milieu surrounding the food available to people affects what and how much they eat.

He discovered that people spontaneously gorge on hundreds of extra calories each day and gain significant amounts of body fat when they live in food environments with an abundance of ultraprocessed foods, which are highly engineered and contain ingredients not used in restaurants or home kitchens. On the flip side, reducing or eliminating ultraprocessed foods results in spontaneous fat loss without effort.

Kevin’s studies build on earlier research that found that as societies shift toward Western-style eating patterns — dense in calories, rich in ultraprocessed foods — people tend to grow fatter. The change is easiest to see in immigrants. When they leave home countries where traditional diets still dominate and they move to places like the United States and Britain, they gain weight and develop chronic diseases at much higher rates than the people they leave behind.

Scientists now have a theory about what’s going on. Humans are born with a system of internal signals — think hormones and neural pathways — that guides our food choices and how much to eat. Toxic food environments disrupt this symphony of internal signals in ways we aren’t conscious of. Our bodies weren’t designed for a calorie onslaught, in the same way a house built for moderate weather isn’t designed for a heat wave.

In Kevin's studies, participants were told to eat as much as they wanted, without trying to gain or lose weight. They rated the whole food and ultraprocessed meals as equally pleasant to eat. Yet in the ultraprocessed food environments, their bodies' internal controls seemed to malfunction, mysteriously recalibrating toward weight gain.

Some 70 percent of the calories available in America today are deemed hyperpalatable and are in foods designed for the overconsumption that chronically sickens us. They're also heavily marketed and cheap. Chronic disease hot spots are the most socioeconomically deprived, with food environments akin to toxic waste sites.

So what can be done?

Healthy and tasty foods have to become a lot more accessible, convenient and affordable. The only way to get there is through policy and regulation, not handshake deals with the food industry to voluntarily remove food dyes or by calling Coca-Cola's offering of a cane sugar soda alongside its corn syrup version a win.

The Food and Drug Administration recently updated its definition of a healthy food, providing a helpful guide for better packaged foods. According to the agency, healthy foods include vegetables, legumes, fruits and whole grains, and they are low in sodium, sugar and saturated fat. We think that ultraprocessed foods that don't meet the F.D.A. definition and that can drive overconsumption should be treated as recreational substances to which we must apply aggressive tax policies, front-of-pack warning labels, marketing restrictions and more, especially for foods marketed to children.

The revenues from taxes we propose on unhealthy food should be directed toward making healthy food more accessible. We don't mean just sending people healthy, whole food, as the administration plans to do with its "MAHA boxes." Not everyone has the time, skill or motivation to cook from scratch. We mean supporting small businesses, grocery stores and food companies that offer healthy, delicious, prepared meals and making these eligible for SNAP, the federal food assistance program. Schools and hospitals should also be incentivized to serve healthy options, not junk food.

To date, the closest this administration has come to tackling the food environment is granting waivers to states to restrict SNAP recipients from using their benefits to buy junk food. Tuesday's MAHA report promised to continue that effort, but on other food environment fixes, the suggestions were largely toothless or vague. On restricting the marketing of junk food to children, for example, the report only promises to "explore the development of potential industry guidelines."

Meanwhile, the Trump administration has ended federal support to programs that helped schools and food banks buy fresh, local produce. It has also rolled back environmental regulations and made cuts to SNAP.

Kevin left his job at the N.I.H. studying ultraprocessed food after his research was censored, a signal that the administration wasn't taking science on toxic food environments seriously. Conversations with leadership about bringing Kevin back to improve human nutrition research fell through. Many in the administration, including Mr. Kennedy, also seem opposed to interventions like the weight-loss and diabetes drugs called GLP-1s, which can help those most susceptible to toxic food environments.

MAHA leaders may decry the evils of the health care system and promote their own products as alternatives, but did everyone fail to notice that the \$6 trillion-plus wellness industry grew alongside rates of chronic disease? Obesity and diabetes are not the result of weak willpower and poor choices. We shouldn't expect that investing in more of the same hacks will have different results.

The path to fixing America's food environment will be bumpy. The global food industry has revenues valued at more than the oil and gas industry — roughly \$8 trillion. The grass-roots MAHA movement, which is calling for healthier food and less chronic disease, should demand more from this administration and beyond. Science has demonstrated that individuals are not to blame. It has been a failure of leadership that has allowed our food environment to chronically sicken us. No supplement or wearable will help.

Julia Belluz, a contributing Opinion writer, and Kevin Hall, a nutrition and metabolism scientist, are the authors of the forthcoming book "Food Intelligence."

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