

# Urban Trends

A quarterly newsletter published by



## Nutrition & Physical Activity

### Eating To Live...or Living to Eat?



#### A Historical Perspective

Hundreds of years ago, when Africans were involuntarily brought to America and enslaved by plantation owners, their food often included the absolute worst cuts of meat — usually what was left over after their masters seized just about all that was lean. They left the bones and fatty parts for the “help.” Black cooks utilized that throwaway food, using it to season other foods. There was no such thing as letting “good” food go to waste. During that era, African Americans ate almost every part of any animal that was caught and cooked, so that they would have the energy to work.

The bigger and more solid slaves were believed to be better workers, and they were sold for more on the open market. Slave owners and traders wanted their “chattel” to eat until they were full.

Fast-forward to today and you’ll see that many African Americans don’t have significantly different diets. For example, not only do they eat pork (not bad in itself), but they flavor vegetables with different pork parts; everything is deep-fried in grease or pan-fried in butter; salt is as essential to food as a plate; and on top of that, they make room for sugary desserts, turning a normally healthy sweet potato, for instance, into a saccharine soufflé. It’s all washed down with soda or sugary juices. This is living to eat.

#### Serious About Food

Some people believe that if they’re taking time out from their day to sit down and eat, that it better be worth it. “I want to be satisfied and I want to be full,” said one woman. “Don’t play with me when it’s time to eat!” Whether they’ve worked hard or played hard,

not many want to eat a container of low-fat yogurt, half a muffin and a banana for breakfast. “It’s instilled in Black folks to eat soul food,” explained a woman from Southern California. Most want pancakes, bacon, eggs, fried potatoes and grits — not a very healthy start to the day, but it’s a filling one. Many African Americans are looking to be “full.” This is living to eat.

Sometimes even being satisfied is not enough. Some people say they regularly eat to the point where they have to loosen their belts. A young Black male explained, “I feel like I have to eat everything on my plate.” Others say they eat because they don’t want someone else to get the last of whatever

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# From the President



African Americans are over-indexing for rates of heart disease, stroke, diabetes and hypertension. The statistics related to obesity and other health risks are both well-known and sobering. The good news is that these conditions can often be improved and/or managed with lifestyle changes, primarily improved nutrition and increased physical activity. The bad news is

that despite more messages and programs promoting a healthier lifestyle, the vast majority of them are not speaking to African Americans in a manner that could motivate them to make long-term behavior change that could literally save their lives.

Part of what has been missing is authentic and credible messages and materials that speak to the daily realities of Black people in America's urban centers. Oversimplified "Just Do It"-like messages fail to resonate, as do those urging inner city residents to exercise on the streets where they don't even feel safe walking to the bus stop. The same applies to messages urging African Americans to buy more fruits and vegetables, when many urban neighborhoods have more fast food and beer-to-go outlets than supermarkets. Overall, there have been few effective social marketing campaigns that have made a difference in the quality of life of some of the most stressed out and underserved populations in this country.

Because of our commitment to positively impact urban communities, even around the toughest issues, MEE has conducted a variety of focus group research in the areas of physical activity and nutrition. Audiences have included African American and Latino adolescents, college students and adults. The latest research included a series of focus groups with African American men and women ages 25 to 44. We believe that it is critical to identify intervention strategies that will help African American adults improve their diet and lifestyle practices and engage in more physical activity. Through more than three years of study, we now understand more about: 1) the current physical activity and nutrition habits of low- and middle-income African Americans; 2) the knowledge, attitudes and beliefs of the Black people towards nutrition and physical activity; 3) the many social and environmental factors that work against better nutrition and increased physical activity among African Americans; and 4) what culturally-appropriate messages to promote lifestyle modification for African Americans, particularly males, should include.

This information has helped MEE identify the barriers, arguments and counter-arguments that one needs to understand before successfully targeting of African Americans with culturally appropriate lifestyle modification messages. We have also gained unique insights into message delivery channels that will work with this target audience. These elements, many of which are outlined in this *UrbanTrends* issue, serve as a strong foundation for a variety of effective social marketing strategies.

MEE's research findings have led to several message development implications for promoting physical activity and nutrition. For example, in focusing on what to say, a message must be easily "shareable" with the members of one's peer group. To effectively change the behavior of a group, for example, to get people to exercise regularly, each individual must be provided with specific reasons why more exercise benefits him or her. In addition, message senders must acknowledge where most African Americans targeted audience are now (Point A) around their eating and exercise habits. They must also stop discounting and respect the unhealthy aspects of the environments and conditions within which many African Americans are living. Another important element is understanding the arguments individuals currently have against more exercise and healthier food choices. By reflecting that urban context and acknowledging their realities, message crafters can gain critical credibility in the urban community. Black people will recognize that the senders understand and empathize with them regarding their situation and have their best interest at heart.

Over the years, another important finding has been that when devising communications for populations of color, the basic communications model must be viewed within the context of an oral (vs. a literate-based) culture. (See the chart on page 3) African Americans tend to interpret and respond to messages in a way that often differs from the mainstream. Communication is a two-way process, that begins with the receiver and includes a back-and-forth interplay with persuasive counter-arguments from the sender. Health interventionist who are trying to get African Americans to eat better and exercise more *must* realize that the process of dialogue and discussion is essential to the eventual acceptance of behavior change messages.

Peace!!!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ivan J. Juzang".

Ivan J. Juzang  
Founder and President

## COMPARING COMMUNICATIONS STYLES

Literate-based	Oral-based
History and information passed down through writing	History and information passed down through stories
Message sender says “Take it or leave it”	Message sender says “Hear it and let me know what you think”
Message is delivered only one way	Personalized message is delivered for each receiver
Individual	Communal (shared) communication
Receiver has little or no opportunity to respond to or question messages	Receiver can ask questions or challenge the message and/or the sender
Sender has no idea about how a message is being received	Sender receives immediate feedback (verbally or non-verbally)
“Just Do It”-type dictums	If it’s not worth debating, it’s not worth doing
Words only carry the message	Inflection, passion and expression are part of the communication

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- A Kwanzaa video

## “Time Is Not On My Side”



### Making Ends Meet

With the lives many African Americans lead today, they don't have time to eat healthy—or so they believe. Many are working two—sometimes three—jobs to make ends meet and to support extended families. “We are too busy to cook for the kids,” said one parent. Many parents wake up at the crack of dawn to get ready for work, only to see their children sleeping, and by the time they come back home in the evening, their children are in that same spot, sleeping. But making time to eat healthily is as much a necessity as making sure they get to those jobs on time so they can pay their bills.

When bills go unpaid, overdue notices follow and then service gets shut off. Likewise, when the body is not taken care of properly, it too will shut down, after giving you signs that it needs to be replenished.

### Lifestyle Issues

African Americans are having a hard enough time trying to make time for their families—trying to implement a diet and exercise regimen is not exactly at the top of their list of things to do. “If anybody can tell me how to get this, then of course I want to do it,” said a woman who lives in Southern Los Angeles. “But if you *don't* tell me how to put it into my life, I can't do it.” Females, generally the caretakers of the household, are making sure that their children are up, clean and prepared for school, while they themselves are rushing from one job to the

next and sometimes even to school. Coming home late at night, there's homework to do, clothes to wash and dinner to cook. Because of time constraints, many women will stop off at a fast food restaurant to bring dinner home—just one less thing they have to do. “I don't get home before 9:00, [p.m.]” explained one harried mother, “so we eat on the road.” By the time they finish with all their nighttime chores, the only thing on their mind is going to sleep. Another mother said, “I don't see my kids—from working day and night.”

Men, too, leave the house early in the morning only to go to construction sites to work in the heat or blustery conditions and to factories where the assembly line seems endless. After eight to 10 hours of intense labor, they want dinner and relaxation. After all, they say they feel as if they've done enough exercise for the day. “I do a lot of lifting, bending and sweating every day,” said one blue-collar worker. Sacrificing an hour daily to do something that will involve a cardiovascular workout is rarely a choice. Many feel that there are so few hours left in a day for oneself that working out is a luxury. Others are just not interested in taking a giant step towards better health—at least not enough to get up and do something about it.

### Working Out at Work

Many people, especially females, feel that the workplace would be an excellent environment to not only get physi-

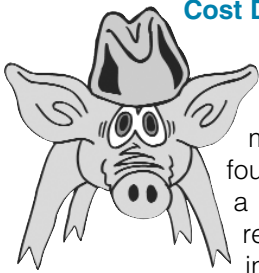
cal activity and nutrition information, but to participate in group physical activity. “I'm constantly searching for something to take the place of the gym,” said a woman who is seeking an alternative to traditional exercise programs. Because they spend such a large amount of time at work, many feel their jobs should invest in an exercise program. Something that keeps their employees in better health should only motivate an employer to create such a program, they say. One participant was familiar with a firm that took its employees' health seriously. “My sister worked for a great company that gave tons of stuff and people took advantage of it,” she said.

### Good Intentions, But...

Sometimes women will look at their teenage daughters and reminisce about the days when they too were once thin and healthy. They will also take a look around at coworkers and even strangers who are the sizes they wish to be. One woman said she still has hope of getting to an acceptable weight. “I want to be able to get into my [size] 14's that I refuse to give away,” she explained. Since many women are motivated by group exercise, some will enlist a few girlfriends to walk vigorously around the neighborhood a few nights a week. But after a while, girlfriends start coming up with excuses and the numbers start to dwindle. Pretty soon, no one is walking and everyone is back to their old habits. “It was a big deal for people to come with me,” explained one woman who tried to organize a walking group. Even though they were initially motivated by improving their physical appearance, their after-work sedentary lifestyles many times supersede their best-laid plans.

Working every day is a grim reality for most of us. You cannot wait until you've hit the lottery, retire early and then have free time to exercise. And raising your children is an important job in itself. With these two inescapable realities, it's time for African Americans to make a decision. More need to choose to be good to themselves by making their health and fitness a priority.

# Making Healthy Food Choices



## Cost Drives Choices

Some African Americans who are trying to be more healthy have found that it's less of a chore to work regular exercise into their lives than it is to actually change their diet. The overwhelming reason, they told MEE, is that the supermarkets charge too much to live a healthy lifestyle. A bag of apples, they explain, may be \$2.50, but if you add a quarter to that price, then you're able to buy a whole bag of chicken wings and eat all week. When you eat to live, but you don't make much money, you have to buy what you can, when you can. "Fruit may be on the bottom of the list in some households," admitted one woman, "because of the cost of living."

## Cultural Traditions

African Americans are not buying fresh fruits and vegetables regularly because for many of them, it is something that will just go to waste. One participant explained, "As Black men, we have a problem with fruits and vegetables." They were not trained as children to eat that way, so it's not something that gets carried over into their adult lives. A male focus group participant said he wants the "basics" in his meals. "I gotta have me some potatoes and some meat," he explained. "That's a meal to me!" Buying fruits and vegetables amounts to "pouring money down the drain" because it goes bad before they've had a chance to eat them or cook with them. It's not something they usually have a taste for either, especially when they wake up at 2 a.m. with a craving. From what they told us, it's safe to assume that at that time of the morning, being satiated by an orange is not going to happen.

African Americans also eat a lot of fried foods, though they know that baking, boiling and steaming are a lot healthier. One participant explained that flavorful food is part of Black culture: "For us, we are dealing with satisfaction with food. We as a people like to enjoy food." To many, deep-fry-



ing means flavor. The other methods often don't measure up. "My Mom started cooking healthy," joked one participant, "and we stopped eating." Even when they cook their vegetables, like collard greens and cabbage, for example, African American have a penchant for adding fatty pieces of meat — usually pork — for the purpose of adding the flavor. However, what they are choosing to ignore is that, yes, they are making those healthy vegetables unhealthy by adding that "flavor."

## Portion Control

What has been difficult for many is to control is portion size. African Americans are unsure of the make-up of a serving size. Asked a male focus group participant, "How do you know how many calories you are consuming a day?" They are unaware that sometimes, by consuming a whole can or bag of certain foods, they may be taking in five or six "servings," which ultimately can contribute to weight gain. They understand in general what it means to be healthy and know that it is important to make sensible choices about food ("For many years you know what to do, but it's procrastination."),

but they just aren't diligent when it comes to making that change for themselves, especially when no one else around them does it.

## Paying the Cost

Many times, what jolts African Americans into the arena of becoming more healthy is when medical problems are diagnosed. A participant shared part of his/her family history: "It [diabetes] runs in my family and is diet related," she said. Years of eating poorly have now led to diseases like high blood pressure and diabetes, forcing them to strictly monitor everything they eat.

Parents don't realize that they're continuing the cycle of unhealthy eating when they buy junk food as snacks for their children. Children who drink soda and eat potato chips and cookies every day, combined with the tendency to sit on the couch and watch TV or play video games, are contributing to a startling increase in childhood obesity. In the same vein, loading up on bread, pasta, starches and fast food is what is continuing the rising trend of obesity in adults.



## Working Up To Working Out

Many African Americans have always had to break a sweat to make a dollar. Looking at things from a socioeconomic and educational perspective, many minorities — because they haven't had the benefit of pursuing higher education — have jobs that are labor-intensive or "blue collar." As a result of working eight concentrated hours anywhere except at a desk, the general mindset is that, when the whistle blows, it's time to go home and relax, not exercise. "I worked hard all day," they reason. "The last thing on my mind is exercising."

What they don't realize is that exercising on a regular basis could actually *increase* the amount of energy they have, thus enabling them to be more active. It could also decrease the amount of fatigue they experience during the day. However, because there is movement involved, many people view exercise as taxing, without even knowing that it also relaxes you and relieves stress. As a middle-aged African American male explained, "By the time I get off work, I'm worn out mentally. So mentally, I cannot do it [think about exercising]."

Even those who have vowed to battle their bulge or those who just want to change their lifestyles, consider the membership fees to popular gyms unreasonable. For many, such costs are far down on their list of priorities. "To belong to a gym is not even in your budget," said a female who struggles to make ends meet. Joining a gym is seen as far from a necessity, especially when they may not be able to attend regularly.

Usually there is something in or around the house to use for working out. Males, many times, have weight

benches or barbells and women always buy at least one exercise video. However, whether or not these things are used is a different story. One focus group participant wondered, "How many people can set aside 60 minutes a day?" But something that is available to everyone is

the expanse of the outdoors. Absolutely free, all anyone has to do is lace up their sneakers and go for a brisk walk. However, what has become a concern are the neighborhoods in which they are walking; many women say that even their area parks are not safe. A woman who lives outside of Los Angeles complained, "Where I live, I can't [even] walk to the grocery store." As a result of the lack of safety, people will stay indoors, grab a snack and watch TV, ignoring the fact that they can exercise indoors.

What African Americans also seem resistant to is the understanding that at least some level of rigorous activity is beneficial. But there are always excuses. "Women in my age group don't like to play organized sports," said one African American woman. "[And] I don't like to walk." Why hand-wash the car when the machines at White Glove Car Wash can do it in half the time? Why park your car at the other end of the mall when there's a spot right in front of Macy's? Why cut the grass when you can

pay a neighborhood kid \$5.00 to do a quasi-professional job? Laziness and complacency have gotten the best of us and it is taking a dangerous toll on our bodies.



## PROGRAMS THAT ARE MAKING A DIFFERENCE

### 100 BLACK MEN OF AMERICA NUTRITION AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY PROGRAM

The California Adolescent Nutrition and Fitness (CANFit) Program has developed a nutrition and physical activity component for the 100 Black Men of America, Inc. It teaches adult mentors how to promote a healthy lifestyle among African American youth (ages 11-18) who participate in the 100 Black Men after-school programs across the nation. "Promoting Nutrition & Physical Activity to African American Males: the '100 Way'" focuses on teaching young people the benefits of good nutrition and physical activity, with the goal of preventing cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and hypertension. It has been recognized as one of the most innovative and impactful community nutrition education and communication programs in the country today.

Contact: Arnell Hinkle, MPH, Executive Director, (CANFit), (510) 644-1533

### THE CHIME EXERCISE PROJECT

A group-based exercise program for older minority adults

The Center for Health Interventions with Minority Elderly (CHIME) was developed as part of a National Institute of Aging-sponsored research project based on group exercise programs for minority older adults. The CHIME Exercise Manual is a step-by-step guide for individuals and organizations interested in starting a community-based health promotion program for older adults. It includes detailed information on setting up the exercise program, teaching the exercises, fitness testing, strategies to motivate people in the program, and how to keep the program up and running.

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Copies of the CHIME Manual are available for \$10, by contacting Thomas R. Prohaska at the University of Illinois at Chicago, (312) 996-6344 or Prohaska@uic.edu.

### WALKING FOR WELLNESS

The Walking for Wellness program is a health promotion and disease prevention program developed by the National Black Women's Health Project now called the Black Women's Health Imperative. Walking for Wellness program was conceived as sisters "walking and talking" to promote their wellness, and promotes well-being through walking groups at pre-selected sites, with participants walking for at least 30 minutes, three times a week. The program objectives are to increase the

physical activity of African American women; reduce the incidence of obesity, heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, certain cancers and related stressors; and improve the health status of Black women and their families by encouraging them to take the initiative to improve and safeguard their health by establishing lifelong healthy habits. Since its inception, the program has been promoted through various national and local partnerships and collaborations, annual events, celebrity spokespersons and health awareness publications.

Women who are interested in participating can sign up online at [www.blackwomenshealth.org](http://www.blackwomenshealth.org). They will receive motivational materials and online personal coaching to help them reach their fitness goals.

### Eating to Live or Living to Eat (cont'd)

er's left. Sometimes it's not just what we're consuming at the dinner table, but at snack time. Eating a half-gallon of ice cream or a whole bag of cookies is not "necessary," but when it's there, it often gets consumed. These poor eating habits contribute to the hardening of arteries, to the expansion of butts and waistlines and to increasing the likelihood of medical consequences. "I think about things that run in my family," a middle-aged African American woman said. "I don't want those diseases."

#### The Rising Tide of Obesity

That is why one of the first rules to watching your diet is "If you don't buy it, you won't eat it." It's time for African Americans to adhere to more healthy guidelines because if they don't, they will continue the cycle of heart disease, hypertension and diabetes for generations. A study released by the American Heart Association indicated that obesity rates are higher in African American women than they are in other Americans. And according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in the year 2000, 20% of all Americans and 29% of all African Americans were obese. People who are obese also face a greater risk of complications from heart disease (such as a heart attack) or diabetes (such as blindness or nerve problems), as well as a greater risk of stroke, particularly if they also have high blood pressure.

#### The Role of Stress

The stress that African Americans experience on a daily basis also contributes to poor eating habits. When people are worried about how they're going to pay their rent or concerned about the well being of a loved one, food becomes a friend that comforts you when you have no other outlets. One participant suggested, "Maybe if we dealt with the other stresses that are on us as a people, then maybe we



could deal with the poor eating, which we do *because* we are stressed." Too much of "comfort" foods, we see, can lead to obesity.

Granted, "eating to live" is not as easy

as it sounds, especially when one has a history of eating poorly, but it is something that has to be done, not only for longevity, but so that people can enjoy their time with family and friends. Yet even the disproportionate health statistics are not enough to spur some to change. A surefire catalyst that works for everyone has not been discovered, but studies should continue on strategies to motivate African Americans to change their behaviors around physical activity and nutrition. The goal should be to move more people toward eating to live, rather than living to eat.

Some ideas include:

- Begin by telling yourself that you're going to make a change for *you*, not for anyone else.
- Start by moderating your portion sizes and by slowly cutting back on the things that you know are not contributing to your health and well-being. This not only includes junk food and fast food, but starchy foods and foods high in sodium.
- Consult your doctor before you begin an exercise regimen, but whatever he advises in terms of moderation, go for it!

Once people begin to notice a change, they will be motivated to not only carry on with their plan, but to bring a friend along on a healthy journey of eating to live and loving the life they lead.

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