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**Fighting 'Big Fat'**  
**An army is mobilizing in a war against junk food. The combatants:  
doctors, lawyers, preachers and moms**

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When physician and author Don Colbert steps up to the altar at large evangelical congregations in the South, he looks out and sees churchgoers who are, to put it bluntly, too fat. Colbert, energetic with a mane of blond hair, tells the faithful that God has a nutritional plan. Break your junk-food addiction, he exhorts. Eat what Jesus ate: fish, whole grains and vegetables. "Do it for yourself and for your children," thunders Colbert, the author of a best-selling book, "What Would Jesus Eat?" "Do it for God!"

Colbert is a soldier in a growing army of lawyers, doctors and otherwise ordinary citizens who are taking on the sprawling and powerful junk-food industry. They're charging that somewhere along the line, America's long romance with fast food, soda and junk has morphed into an abusive relationship. And they've set out to change the finger-lickin' eating habits that have made obesity, particularly in children, a national concern. On the front lines of this grass-roots movement are suburban moms fighting to get healthier fare in cafeterias and lawmakers around the country who are trying to pass laws to limit the junk food sold in schools. Behind the scenes, doctors are trying to figure out how junk food affects our metabolism and just how much is too much. Now lawyers are filing class-action lawsuits against fast-food makers, charging that deceptive marketing practices encourage obesity. "For years I ate fast food because it was efficient and cheap," says Caesar Barber, 56, a maintenance worker with heart disease and the lead plaintiff in an anti-fast-food lawsuit filed in New York last week. "I had no idea I could be damaging my health." This fall, Northeastern University law professor Richard Daynard is holding a closed-door strategy session for nearly 100 lawyers interested in pressing similar claims against Big Fat, or what--in reference to "Big Tobacco"--they're calling "Big Food." "Five years ago, when we said we'd take junk-food makers to court," says Daynard, "people laughed."

Fast-food makers call the obesity lawsuits "absurd," and the junk-food industry is battling any efforts to curb its sales. For years it has argued--and most Americans agree--that individual self-control, not lawsuits or legislation, is the cure for adult obesity. Instead of demonizing particular foods, says Richard Berman, executive director of the Center for Consumer Freedom, a trade group for soda and chain restaurants, "people should prevent obesity by getting regular exercise."

But with the sudden, dramatic up-tick in childhood obesity, its blame-the-fatso argument is beginning to have a hollow ring. Diseases that used to be associated with retirement homes--atherosclerosis and type II diabetes--are now commonly diagnosed by pediatricians. "Fat kids are to the junk-food industry what secondhand smoke was in the war against tobacco," says Yale University psychology professor Kelly Brownell. "Everyone can agree on personal responsibility until they realize there are passive victims here." Activist parents say schoolkids aren't sophisticated enough to understand that a fruit-flavored soft drink doesn't have the nutritional benefits of, say, real fruit.

In the war against junk food, the overweight children crowded into Dr. David Ludwig's drab waiting room could be considered collateral damage. Ludwig, a pediatric endocrinologist, has dedicated his career to determining exactly which foods make his young patients fat. Researchers like Ludwig provide lawmakers, public-health officials and parents with something that is in drastically short supply--a scientifically tested model of what kids should and shouldn't eat. "What changes have you made?" booms Ludwig, as a 226-pound 10-year-old squeezes into his small examining room. The boy proudly describes how he's stopped eating cookies and slowed down on chips since his last visit.

Three years ago Ludwig demonstrated how consumption of high glycemic foods like sugary breakfast cereal and hamburger buns leads to overeating (sidebar). Last year Ludwig published a study tying soda consumption with obesity. Anyone with the raw intelligence to decipher a nutrition label might call Ludwig's soda study common sense, but the powerful soda-industry lobby was outraged that its products were being singled out for blame. Within a month the National Soft Drink Association released its own soda-industry-sponsored study refuting Ludwig's conclusion. The NSDA also paid the influential American Dietetic Association, which licenses the country's 70,000 dietitians, to issue a fact sheet asserting that carbonated soft drinks--which contain no vitamins, minerals or fiber--are part of a well-balanced diet. "We don't think Ludwig's studies are legitimate," says NSDA spokesman Sean McBride. Undeterred, Ludwig believes that rigorous scientific inquiry will do more to sway public opinion than expensive PR campaigns. He's getting ready to launch another study tracking the effects of fast food on kids.

Barber and the other plaintiffs in the recently filed class-action suit say they already know the effect of too many Big Macs and Whoppers: obesity, heart disease and high cholesterol. And they think they can convince a jury that fast food made them sick. Their lawsuit charges that McDonald's, Burger King, Kentucky Fried Chicken and

Wendy's failed to disclose the health effects of eating their sugary, high-fat products. They're pressing for monetary damages, of course, but they also want the companies to put cigarette-style warning labels on their food.

Saralyn Myers doesn't need a warning label to know junk food is bad for her kids. Three years ago the mother of two launched a movement in her town to provide healthy alternatives to the hot dogs, Domino's pizza and vending-machine snacks that the elementary-school kids were being served for lunch. Like parents at hundreds of other schools around the country, Myers found that the school menu in Dobbs Ferry, N.Y., didn't make sense. "We insist on high academic standards," says Myers. "Why not have high standards for the kind of food we eat?" So Myers founded a committee, sent out a survey and set up "taste tests" to find out what elementary schoolers would eat. Similar parent committees in Oakland and Berkeley, Calif., recently converted their schools to an all-vegetarian, all-organic menu. In Wisconsin and Florida, they replaced soda with flavored milks, but Myers's team was satisfied with more modest changes. They substituted whole-wheat bread for white bread and added chickpeas and sunflower seeds to the salad bar. Although some days Domino's pizza is on the menu, other days kids are offered veggie burgers, along with beef patties on white buns.

For every kindergartner choosing whole-wheat bread instead of white, there are many more who eat lunch from the cafeteria vending machines. In this country, 43 percent of elementary schools and nearly all high schools have machines that sell soda, sugary drinks, candy and chips to hungry kids. The junk-food trade in schools has become so brisk that state lawmakers and public-health departments are stepping in. West Virginia has banned junk food in school vending machines. Texas, California, Oklahoma and Maryland have legislation pending. Last year Kentucky's Lt. Gov. Stephen Henry, who is also a physician, found himself in a bare-knuckled legislative battle after he championed a bill that put minimum nutritional standards on foods sold in school vending machines. It was hardly the Ornish diet. Rice Krispie Treats, Doritos and Pop-Tarts would pass muster, but Fritos and candy would be banned. Still, school administrators, afraid to jeopardize the income they get from vending-machine purchases, opposed the bill. Incensed, Henry began to canvas the state, asking for, and getting, support from parents and fellow physicians. As the bill picked up speed, soda and junk-food lobbyists swarmed into Kentucky. Last spring the bill died before it reached a final vote. "I've amputated the legs of diabetics, and I can clearly see the road that leads from the school cafeteria to the operating room," says Henry. He's preparing to reintroduce the bill next year.

As more states and districts try to limit kids' access to junk, the debate over vending machines, which has been simmering for years, may be reaching a boiling point. Junk-food makers are resolute: they need to appeal to kids in order to sell their products. "They've got no choice," says Dan DeRose, who negotiates soda contracts for schools nationwide. "They need to create their core consumer." But their presence in the schools places corporate interests on a collision course with public-health concerns and prompts some rather unpalatable rationalizations. Testifying before a Senate subcommittee last spring, a nutritionist from the Grocery Manufacturers of America suggested that without

vending machines in schools, children "don't have the right tools to navigate the food environment as they get older." And cash-strapped public schools can't afford to turn down easy money. School administrators use those funds for extras like band uniforms and after-school sports. Last spring, two years after Myers modified the lunchroom menu at her local school, PepsiCo. offered to pay her district for the right to put vending machines in the schools. She was demoralized. "Everyone was excited about the money the school might get," says Myers. "No one asked whether this was good for the children." Hard questions with no easy answers.

**Caption:**

Get The Junk Out: A practicing physician, Kentucky Lt. Gov. Stephen Henry was appalled to see what kids were being served for lunch

High Standards: Myers (above) got sunflower seeds and chickpeas added to her kids' school menu, Colbert treats a patient

(Map of United States Color-Coded by State)Healthy School Zones: The USDA has anti-junk-food guidelines for schools, but some states are going further.(Graphic Omitted)