

# Ad blitz dismisses obesity threat as 'hype'

Center for Consumer Freedom spent \$600,000 on ads

[Reuters](#)

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LOS ANGELES - A group backed by the U.S. food and restaurant industries Monday launched an advertising campaign aimed at dismissing as hype concerns about the large number of obese Americans.

The full-page ads in major U.S. newspapers were inspired by new government data questioning government assertions that obesity causes nearly as many deaths as smoking, according to the Center for Consumer Freedom, which paid for the ads.

The group, based in Washington, does not disclose names of its donors, though spokesman Mike Burita said casual dining restaurant chains "are predominant sources of funding for us."

A spokesman for Darden Restaurants Inc., the nation's largest casual dining company and owner of the Red Lobster and Olive Garden chains, could not say whether Darden was among contributors to the group.

Applebee's International Inc., another major casual dining chain, also could not say whether it contributes to the group, a spokeswoman said.

The group spent about \$600,000 on the ads, which appeared Monday in the New York Times, Washington Post, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, USA Today and the Chicago Tribune. Ads are also to run in Newsweek magazine and on billboards in the Washington-area metro system.

The campaign, Burita said, was sparked by new statistics from the National Center for Health Statistics, a unit of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, that contradict previous findings from the CDC that obesity was catching up to heart disease as a major cause of death in the United States.

The CDC has said that smoking kills 435,000 Americans a year and that obesity kills close to 400,000 annually. But the NCHS report issued last week cuts that number by 75 percent.

Since it was published last year, the CDC's 400,000 figure has been cited in media reports regarding the impact of obesity on everything from healthcare costs to diets.

At the same time, U.S. food and restaurant companies have faced increased criticism from health and nutrition advocates who blame foods high in fat and sugar for contributing to what critics have called a nationwide obesity epidemic.

The Center for Consumer Freedom hopes the ads will capture the attention of lawmakers and the CDC.

"We're putting pressure on the leadership of the CDC, who has still not endorsed this new figure," Burita said.

CDC spokesman Tom Skinner, who said he has seen the ad, said the CDC was not wrong a year ago.

"All the science around computing mortality associated with obesity is still evolving. If you look at the papers and try to compare them, you really can't do that," Skinner said.

He said it was more important to look at obesity-associated illness and disability. "It is a well-known fact that obesity is also contributing to other well-known leading causes of death including cancer and diabetes," Skinner said.

Burita said his group wants some perspective. "Obesity is certainly a genuine problem. But when genuine problems become political issues they tend to become exaggerated, as this has," he said.

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