FACT SHEET

American Heart Association.

Unhealthy and Unregulated
Food Advertising and Marketing to Children

OVERVIEW

Research shows that marketing and advertising of high-calorie, low-nutrient foods and beverages increases children's preference and intake of unhealthy foods and beverages.[1] Unhealthy food marketing aimed at children and teens is a significant contributor to poor diet quality and diet-related diseases worldwide.[2] Poor diet quality is a major cause of ill health, contributing to chronic diseases like coronary heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and obesity.[3,4] Youth who have cardiovascular disease risk factors, such as high blood pressure, obesity, and diabetes, are more likely to have these risk factors as adults, putting them at greater risk for heart disease and stroke.[5] The American Heart Association sees no ethical, political, scientific, or social justification for marketing and advertising low-nutrient, high-calorie foods to children and supports efforts to diminish this practice.

REGULATION IN THE U.S.

Although many countries across the world tightly control or ban food advertising and marketing aimed at youth,[6] this is not the case in the United States. In 1980, in response to corporate pressure, Congress removed the Federal Trade Commission's (FTC) authority to restrict food advertising and limited its jurisdiction regarding advertising to children.[7] In 2009, bipartisan legislation directed the creation of the Interagency Working Group (IWG) on Food Marketed to Children to curb the marketing of unhealthy foods for children aged 2-17 years old.[8] Although the American Heart Association supported IWG's recommendations as being based on "robust, science-based nutrition principles," organizations like the Grocery Manufacturers' Association pushed back saying the recommendations were unworkable and inconsistent with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.[9] Ultimately, the IWG's efforts failed. While the food industry has made some strides in self-regulation through the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI), the program is not strong enough. There are still companies that do not participate and many of the foods allowed to be marketed to children under these voluntary standards are still unhealthy.[10] In 2018, the food and beverage industry spent $29 million lobbying on food and beverage issues at the federal level.[11]

THE COST OF CONSTANT EXPOSURE

Children are regularly exposed to advertising and marketing through television, the internet, social media, magazines, schools, product placements, video games, cell phones, and other means. These advertisements are designed to boost brand recognition, sales, and loyalty, more often for unhealthy, high-calorie foods. Unfortunately, most of these products have excessive amounts of added sugars, salt, and saturated fat, and inadequate amounts of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.[12] Promotion of these products is not limited to advertisements. Marketing practices also include promotions, product placements, celebrity endorsements, and incentives.[12] Young children are especially vulnerable to these marketing and advertising strategies because they are developmentally less able to comprehend their intent.[13]

A report from the FTC revealed that industry spent nearly $1.8 billion in 2009 marketing and advertising foods and beverages to children. The top three sources were fast food ($714 million), carbonated beverages ($395 million), and breakfast cereals ($186 million).[14] In 2016, more than 20,300 food, beverage, and restaurant companies spent approximately $13.5 billion in advertising on all media.[15] There have been some improvements in food marketing to children, but children (ages 2-14) continued to see an average 10 to 11 television ads per day in 2016, or approximately 4,000 ads for the year.[15] This does not factor in ads seen on social media, video games, cell phone apps, in schools, and all other marketing directed at children. In 2009, when the FTC report came out, only 35.4% advertising expenditures of food and beverage to youth was spent on TV advertising.[16] One study found that children find it harder to recognize advertisements on websites than they do on TV.[17]

In order to address current issues with child-directed food marketing, Healthy Eating Research created *Recommendations for Responsible Food Marketing to Children*.[18] These recommendations were developed by a panel of experts and define child-directed marketing as advertising aimed at birth through 14 years old. The recommendations address the range of food marketing practices used and specifies approaches, techniques, platforms, and venues used to target children.

FACT SHEET: Food Advertising and Marketing to Children

TARGETED MARKETING

Targeted marketing is the practice of designing marketing programs that appeal specifically to a group of consumers whom a company has identified as especially attractive for its business.[19] Targeted marketing is not inherently wrong; however, food and beverage targeted marketing to children and communities of color is problematic because it primarily promotes unhealthy products.

- In 2016, children viewed television ads that primarily promoted unhealthy products—including fast food and other restaurants, candy, sweet and salty snacks, and sugary drinks. Fewer than 10% of food ads promoted healthier products.[15]
- Food marketing on new media is increasing and influences children's food preferences and choices.[20]
- High-sugar breakfast cereal TV advertising directed at children is associated with brand-specific high-sugar breakfast cereal intake among preschoolers.[21]
- Youth of color get a "double dose" of unhealthy food and beverage marketing—they are exposed to marketing campaigns aimed at all children as well as marketing campaigns targeted to their own communities.[22]
- A 2019 report found that despite overall food and beverage advertising declining 4%, food and beverage advertising targeting black people increased more than 50% from 2013 to 2017.[23]
- Disparities between black and white youth exposure to all food-related TV ads has increased. In 2017, black teens viewed 119% more food-related TV ads than white teens compared to 70% more in 2013.[23]
- 8 out of 10 of the food and beverage ads seen by Hispanic children on Spanish-language television promote fast food, candy, sugary drinks, and snacks.[23]
- Hispanic children and youth are less likely to visit the internet overall, but more likely to visit food and beverages websites than their non-Hispanic peers.[24]

THE ASSOCIATION RECOMMENDS

The American Heart Association supports policy change that limits the marketing and advertising of low-nutrient, high-calorie foods and beverages to U.S. children.

- The association supports Healthy Eating Research's recommendations for food advertising and marketing to children. The food industry should incorporate these recommendations into the CFBAI.
- Only healthy foods, such as fruit, vegetables, low-fat dairy products, and whole grains should be advertised and marketed to children. Implicit in this recommendation is that foods that are advertised meet criteria that the association has set for nutrients that affect cardiovascular disease risk, such as added sugars, sodium, saturated fat, and fiber.
- The association supports establishing nutrition standards for restaurant children's meals and making the default options in kids' meals healthier, since having kids' meals is a way that the restaurant industry markets to children.
- Advertising, marketing, and brand awareness strategies used by industry should not be allowed in schools or educational materials.
- The association supports robust food and beverage marketing standards in local school wellness policies.

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