

POLICY BRIEF

FOOD ADVERTISING TO CHILDREN

SUMMARY

Children are exposed to a huge amount of unhealthy food advertising in Australia through television and other media. There is substantial evidence that this advertising influences children's food preferences and consumption, and is likely to contribute to overweight and obesity. Current regulations are ineffective for reducing children's exposure to unhealthy food advertising. National legislation is required to restrict all forms of unhealthy food advertising directed to children, or to which children are exposed to a significant degree. There is a very high level of public support for such legislation.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

Children are targeted through extensive, integrated marketing campaigns that utilise multiple media platforms, which saturate children with unhealthy foodⁱ advertising and undermine healthy eating messages from parents, schools, communities and governments.

On average, children spend 32 hours a week on screens at home.ⁱ Children access a range of media and the distinction between traditional media and digital media is becoming blurred. For instance, children are watching television differently with 68% of children aged 0–14 watching children's programs available on-demand for free over the internet, from sites such as YouTube and 47% watch free to air, catch-up services. Nearly half (47 per cent) use online subscription services, such as Netflix or Stan.ⁱⁱ

What remains unchanged is that all these mediums are laden with advertisements so that they become the wallpaper of our children's lives. During peak TV viewing times, children are exposed to 3 unhealthy food advertisements an hour and 44% of food advertisements are for unhealthy foods.ⁱⁱⁱ

In terms of internet activity, multiple studies report that children access platforms that offer a wide range of content for all ages, not just child-specific content.^{iv} Sites popular with children include Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube. This is particularly concerning as a 2017 survey reported that the fastest growing influence on respondent's purchasing decisions is social media with 36% saying that it had an influence.^v For more information, please see '[How unhealthy food is marketed to children through digital media](#)'

In addition to screen based advertising, food advertisers frequently target children through other channels, including children's magazines^{vi} websites^{vii} outdoor media^{viii} direct mail, email and food packaging.^{ix}

Food advertisers also use sport sponsorship and promotional techniques to target children including:

- offers of 'premiums' with products, such as free toys and competitions
- endorsements by popular children's personalities or characters
- 'tie-in' promotions of products with children's films
- children's clubs on food company websites, where children register their details to access website activities and receive food vouchers and other promotional material.

ⁱ A reference to 'food' in this paper includes food and beverages unless otherwise stated or indicated by its context.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS?

Food advertising influences children's food preferences and consumption, and is likely to contribute to poor diets, weight gain and obesity in children. This is of serious concern when over a quarter of Australian children are overweight or obese.

Food advertising to children also raises serious ethical concerns, as children do not have the cognitive capacity to understand and resist the influence of advertising.

WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE?

Children's vulnerability to advertising

Psychological research has found that children are highly vulnerable to advertising because they do not understand its persuasive intent and lack the cognitive ability needed to interpret advertising messages critically.^x

Effects of food advertising on children

Comprehensive and systematic reviews of the evidence on food advertising to children have consistently concluded that food advertising influences the types of food children prefer, demand and consume, and is likely to contribute to poor diets, negative health outcomes, weight gain and obesity in children.^{xi}

Benefits of restricting food advertising

Limiting exposure of children to unhealthy food marketing has been identified by the World Health Organization as a cost effective, population-wide intervention to reduce diet-related risk factors for non-communicable disease, including obesity.^{xii}

In the UK, restrictions on the advertising of foods high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) directed or likely to appeal to children have been in place since 2007. The UK Office of Communications (Ofcom) found that UK the HFSS restrictions led to a 37% reduction in high fat, sugar and salt food advertisements seen by children. Ofcom estimated that younger children (aged 4-9 years) saw 52% less unhealthy food ads, while older children (aged 10-15 years) saw 22% less ads.^{xiii} Ofcom reported that there was no decline in total advertising revenue for TV channels after the introduction of the UK restrictions.^{xiv}

WHAT ACTION HAS BEEN TAKEN?

Current food advertising regulations

There is no specific government regulation of unhealthy food advertising to children in Australia. The Children's Television Standards are the only government regulations dealing with advertising to children. They apply only to advertising on free-to-air television during (low-rating) 'P' and 'C' classified children's programs, and include only one provision on food advertising (which prevents ads that contain misleading information about the nutritional content of foods). The Standards do not apply at times or during programs when most children watch TV, and do not include any general restrictions on unhealthy food advertising.

Food advertising to children through other media is self-regulated by the food and advertising industries under a complex system of voluntary codes.

These codes do not apply to the highest rating children's programs, do not cover all forms of promotion, do not apply to all food advertisers, and contain unclear and inadequate nutrition criteria. Compliance with the codes is not monitored, and there are no sanctions for breaches. A recent Cancer Council NSW report confirms that food industry self-regulation in Australia has not been effective in reducing children's exposure to unhealthy food marketing. Australian children still see, on average, three advertisements for unhealthy foods and beverages during each hour of prime time television they watch. This figure remains unchanged despite the Australian food industry introducing two voluntary codes on food marketing to children in 2009.

Recommendations to restrict food advertising to children

In recognition of the evidence of the effects of unhealthy food advertising on children, in 2010 the World Health Assembly endorsed recommendations by the World Health Organization for countries to develop policy mechanisms to reduce children's exposure to unhealthy food advertising and to eliminate this advertising from children's settings.^{xv} Recently, the World Health Organization's

Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity recommendations included to reduce exposure of children to marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages.^{xvi}

In 2009, the National Preventative Health Taskforce, established by the Australian Government, recommended that the exposure of children and others to marketing, advertising, promotion, and sponsorship of energy-dense nutrient poor food and beverages should be reduced, as part of a range of measures to address obesity. Specifically, the Taskforce recommended that restrictions on marketing of unhealthy foods should be introduced, commencing with the phasing out of unhealthy food advertising to children on free-to-air and pay TV over 4 years, and the phasing out of premium offers, toys, competitions and the use of promotional characters to market these foods to children across all media sources.

The Taskforce's Technical Report on Obesity suggested that consideration should be given to banning the advertising of energy-dense, nutrient poor foods and beverages on free-to-air television during children's viewing hours, i.e. between 6am and 9pm, and reducing or removing such advertising in other media, such as print, internet, radio, in-store and via mobile telephone.

PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR ACTION

A national study conducted in 2012^{xvii} and a NSW study conducted in 2014^{xviii} found that 86% and approximately three quarters of participants surveyed respectively were in favour of the Government introducing stronger restrictions to reduce the amount of unhealthy food advertising seen by children.

WHAT ACTION IS NEEDED?

As part of a comprehensive approach to overweight and obesity, the Australian Government must act to impose legislative, regulatory or strong co-regulatory measures to reduce the volume and influence of food marketing reaching children. Essential features of an effective, comprehensive scheme include:

1. time based restrictions on free to air television to apply when the greatest number of children are likely to be watching (weekdays between 6.00am-9.00am and 4.00pm-9.00pm and on weekends between 6.00am-12.00pm and 4.00pm-9.00pm);
2. application across all forms of marketing communication directed to children, or to which children are likely to be exposed, including marketing to mixed audiences;
3. definition of "unhealthy food" by reference to established nutrient profile scoring criteria^{xix};
4. increasing the age of protection by defining children as under 16 as a minimum;
5. mandatory participation by all food and beverage advertisers;
6. administration and enforcement by an independent agency;
7. imposition of meaningful disincentives and sanctions for breach that apply



to both content creators (marketers and food industries) and the digital platforms.

MORE INFORMATION

For more information, refer to the following Obesity Policy Coalition policy briefs and reports:

- [Evidence of the effects of food advertising on children](#)
- [Food advertising regulation in Australia](#)
- [How unhealthy food is marketed to children through digital media](#)

About the Obesity Policy Coalition

The Obesity Policy Coalition (OPC) is a coalition between the Cancer Council Victoria, Diabetes Victoria and the Global Obesity Centre at Deakin University, a World Health Organization Collaborating Centre for Obesity. The OPC advocates for evidence-based policy and regulatory change to address overweight, obesity and unhealthy diets in Australia, particularly among children.

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- ^v Deloitte Media Consumer Survey, Australian Media and Digital Preferences- 6th edition, p31
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- ^{xix} The nutrient profile scoring criteria refers to the nutrient profile model developed by the UK Food Standards Agency and adapted for use in Australia by Food Standards Australia New Zealand