

Nutrition News

Department of Human Nutrition

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Food Marketing to Children

Over the last 20 years, the rates of obesity have doubled in children and tripled in teens. Even for children at a healthy weight, few eat a nutritious diet as defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Most children's diets are too high in calories, saturated and trans fat, refined sugars and salt. Their diets are also too low in fruits, vegetables, whole grains and calcium. This can lead to an increased incidence of heart disease, diabetes, cancer and other serious and costly diseases.

Although children's food choices are affected by many factors, food marketing plays a key role. Studies show that food marketing attracts children's attention, influences their food choices and encourages them to beg their parents to make specific purchases.

Each day children receive about 65 messages from television advertising and half of those ads are for food. The food and beverage industry spends billions

of dollars advertising to children, teens and many ads target kids under 12. Barbara H. Fiese, University of Illinois professor, states "Young children are easy targets for these marketers' messages, especially when the pitch is delivered by a cartoon character or other media personality they trust. These ads create a demand for unhealthy foods, and parents often feel ill-equipped to say no." According to Fiese, in the past 25 years the percentage of food dollars spent away from home has grown from approximately 26% to over 40%, and 93% of kid's meals are too high in calories for children, she said. "But it's a battle because even two-year-olds can recognize the symbols for fast-food restaurants and lobby their parents for items they've seen advertised," she noted.

In January 2006, the National Academies' Institute of Medicine (IOM) recommended that food and media companies shift

the mix of foods marketed to youth toward healthier foods within two years, or Congress should act. In response, the food industry formed the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI) which is a self-regulatory program administered by the Council of Better Business Bureaus (CBBB).

By June 2007, 10 companies which accounted for about 80% of the TV food ads for youth released pledges to address the food marketing to children. Since then, seven more companies have joined in.

Now, nearly four years since the IOM made the recommendation, nutrition information has been collected by the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) from company websites or product packaging found in local grocery stores in Washington, D.C. Of the 452 products approved by companies in the winter of 2009 to market to children,

391 were foods and 61 were beverages. The most common types of foods were yogurt, fruit flavored snacks and frozen treats. Beverages approved were juice drinks, 100% juice and sports drinks. Nearly 60% of products approved by companies for marketing to children did not meet CSPI's recommended nutrition standards such as pudding, fruit-flavored snacks, cookies and sweet snacks. The good news: 73% of yogurts met the standards, in addition to Nabisco Teddy Grahams, Kellogg's Frosted Mini-Wheats and Eggo Waffles, Skippy Reduced Fat Peanut Butters and several Kid Cuisine frozen dinners.

Ads for foods of poor nutritional quality decreased slightly, from 88% of food ads in 2005 to 79% in 2009. This change was

not statistically significant. In 2009, eight in ten advertised foods during children's programming on Nickelodeon were of poor nutritional quality.

This study suggests that self-regulation is having a modest, positive impact, but too many unhealthy foods are still on the market for children. One weakness of self-regulation is that each company has its own nutrition standards for marketing to children and too many loopholes exist. CSPI states that in order for self-regulation to result in more than incremental change, all food and media companies that market to children need to adopt a uniform set of strong nutrition standards.

In July 2010, a report by an Interagency Working Group on Food Marketed

to Children with members from the FTC, CDC, FDA and USDA, will include recommended nutrition standards for food marketing to children. Will the country need to rely on government regulation rather than self-regulation as a way to address food marketing to children? Fiese hopes to see policy makers tackle food marketing to children.

References:

- Center for Science in the Public Interest. (11/09). Better-For-Who? Revisiting company promises on food marketing to children. Batada, A and Wootan, M.
- Science Daily. (9/9/09). Public Policy should promote Family Mealtimes, Researchers Urge, Fiese, B.
- Center for Science in the Public Interest. (1/05). Guidelines for Responsible Food Marketing to Children. Wootan, M. www.cspinet.org/marketingguidelines.pdf

For more information about healthy eating, contact your local extension office.

The Food Assistance Program can help people of all ages with low income buy nutritious foods for a better diet.

To find out more, call toll-free 1-888-369-4777.

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