

The truth about advertising junk food to children: It works

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(Medical Xpress) -- Children exposed to advertisements for high-calorie and nutrient-poor foods consume more unhealthy foods overall, regardless of the specific product and brand being marketed, finds a new study from the Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at Yale University. The study, published in *Economics and Human Biology*, shows a relationship between children's exposure to food advertising on television and the consumption of unhealthy food, particularly sugar-sweetened beverages and fast food.

Using the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K), a nationally representative dataset, the study tracked food consumption patterns and Body Mass Index (BMI) among nearly 10,000 children in the fifth grade. The children's BMI were obtained through height and weight measurements, and food consumption patterns were reported by the children themselves. Nielsen, a media research company, provided data on spot television [advertising](#) of cereals, [fast food](#) restaurants, and soft drinks to children aged 6-11. Once all data were garnered, researchers examined the associations between exposure to television advertising across the top 55 designated markets and children's food consumption and BMI.

The findings reveal that television advertising of sugar-sweetened beverages and fast food is associated with increased overall consumption of these products among elementary school children. Exposure to 100 television ads for sugar-sweetened soft drinks was associated with a 9.4% rise in the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages. The same increase in exposure to fast food advertising was associated with a 1.1% rise in children's consumption of fast food. While there was no detectable impact of advertising exposure on children of average body weight, fast food advertising was significantly associated with higher BMI for those children who were overweight and obese.

"[Unhealthy foods](#) are most commonly advertised to children. Since exposure to this type of [advertising](#) is associated with increased consumption, children's diets are directly impacted with potential long-term effects on BMI and health, especially among the heaviest children," said lead author Tatiana Andreyeva, Ph.D., the Rudd Center's director of economic initiatives.

"This study provides direct evidence that food marketing to children influences much more than their preferences for one brand over another," noted co-author Jennifer L. Harris, Ph.D., M.B.A., the Rudd Center's director of marketing initiatives. "It also contributes to greater consumption of fast food and sugary beverages, two of the least nutritious product categories commonly advertised to [children](#)."

Provided by Yale University

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