

# Television advertising limits can reduce childhood obesity, study concludes

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Limiting the hours of television advertising for foods and beverages high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) could make a meaningful contribution to reducing childhood obesity, according to a new study published this week in *PLOS Medicine* by Oliver Mytton of the University of Cambridge, UK, and colleagues.

Childhood [obesity](#) is a global problem with few signs of progress. As part of the UK government's plan to halve childhood obesity by 2030, it is considering limitations on [television advertising](#) for HFSS products between the hours of 5:30 a.m. and 9 p.m. In the new study, researchers used data on [children's](#) exposure to HFSS advertising during these hours, as well as previously published information on the association between exposure to HFSS advertising and children's caloric intake.

The study concluded that if all HFSS advertising in the UK was withdrawn during the hours in question, the 3.7 million children in the UK would see on average 1.5 fewer HFSS advertisements per day and decrease their caloric intake by an average of 9.1 kcal (95%CI 0.5-17.7). This would

reduce the number of children aged 5 through 17 with obesity by 4.6% (95%CI 1.4-9.5) and the number of children considered overweight by 3.6% (95%CI 1.1-7.4). This is equivalent to 40,000 fewer UK children with obesity and 120,000 fewer classified as overweight and would result in a monetary benefit to the UK of £7.4 billion (95%CI 2.0 billion-16 billion). The study only considered the direct impact of HFSS advertising on children's caloric intake and did not consider the impact of HFSS advertising on changing both children's and adults' dietary preferences and habits.

"Measures which have the potential to reduce exposure to less-healthy food advertising on television could make a meaningful contribution to reducing [childhood obesity](#)," the authors say. However, they also point out that "this is a modeling study and we cannot fully account for all factors that would affect the impact of this policy if it was implemented."

"Our analysis shows that introducing a 9 p.m. watershed on unhealthy TV food advertising can make a valuable contribution to protecting the future health of all children in the UK, and help level up the health of children from less affluent backgrounds," said Dr. Mytton. "However, children now consume media from a range of sources, and increasingly from online and on-demand services, so in order to give all children the opportunity to grow up healthy it is important to ensure that this [advertising](#) doesn't just move to the 9-10 p.m. slot and to online services."

**More information:** Oliver T. Mytton et al. The potential health impact of restricting less-healthy food and beverage advertising on UK television between 05.30 and 21.00 hours: A modeling study, *PLOS Medicine* (2020). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pmed.1003212](#)

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