

Food Marketing to Children and Adolescents



For the majority of Americans who do not use tobacco, the most important behaviors to reduce cancer risk are weight control, dietary choices, and physical activity.^{1,2} Overweight and obesity are clearly associated with an increased risk of cancers of the breast in postmenopausal women, colorectal, endometrium, kidney, pancreas, and adenocarcinoma of the esophagus; and may be associated with many other cancers.³

Nearly, one in three children are overweight or obese; and childhood overweight and obesity increases the risk of these conditions in adulthood. The majority of children consume diets too low in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains and too high in sodium, saturated fats, and added sugars. Many of the foods and beverages that are heavily marketed to children contribute to poor diet quality, high calorie intake, and excess weight gain.⁴

The American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network (ACS CAN) is focused on creating healthy social and physical environments and providing consumers with clear, useful information that support making healthy lifestyle choices. Reducing the marketing of unhealthy foods to children is an important strategy for reducing childhood obesity and creating an environment that supports healthy food choices.⁵

What is Food Marketing to Children and Adolescents?

Marketing is a process widely used by companies to encourage consumption of their products.⁶ Child-directed marketing has been defined as any marketing that targets children from birth through 14 years of age.⁷ Child-directed food marketing is often determined by two main characteristics:

- 1) The media or venue in which the marketing is placed
- 2) The content of the marketing messages⁸

Companies target children and adolescents using many different venues and strategies including food packaging, school vending machines, recreation league scoreboards, toys, giveaways and contests, product placement in commercials, movies, TV shows, video games, and on restaurant menus. Digital media such as text messaging, cell phones, email, social media sites, and other websites, and cross-promotions involving movies, popular licensed characters, and books are also used to target messages to children and adolescents.

These strategies work well because adolescents' stage of brain and cognitive development makes them susceptible to marketing overall, and especially to marketing for tempting products that require well-developed self-regulatory abilities to resist. Messages and product placements, particularly those in social and mobile media markets, are often disguised as entertainment or messages from peers, making them difficult to recognize as marketing, even for older children. Children ages 12 to 14 face heightened risk from the influence of unhealthy food marketing due to their greater independence, higher levels of media consumption, and recent increases in the amount of marketing to children ages 12 and older for unhealthy food and beverage products.⁹

What Marketing Do Children and Adolescents See?

According to the Institute of Medicine, food and beverage advertising affects children's food preferences, purchase requests, beliefs, and short-term consumption.¹⁰ In 2014, children viewed on average 12.8 ads per day for foods, beverages, and restaurants, and adolescents viewed 15.2 ads per day.¹¹ Snack food ads make up more than 40% of all food and beverage TV ads viewed by children and teens and primarily promote candy, sweet snacks (including cookies, snack bars, and fruit snacks), and savory snacks (including chips and crackers).¹² There is also a growing number of snack food ads on social media and mobile phone apps.¹³ Furthermore, in-store and on-package marketing is the

sixth-leading category of food marketing expenditures directed toward children. In 2009, companies spent \$113 million on packaging and in-store marketing to reach youth audiences.¹⁴

Recommendations for Responsible Food Marketing to Children

ACS CAN supports strong nutrition criteria¹⁵ for food marketing to encourage parents, children, and adolescents to make healthier food choices and to address childhood obesity. ACS CAN participated in the development of Recommendations for Responsible Food Marketing to Children, a report developed under the leadership of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.¹⁶

Responsible food marketing to children and adolescents can only be achieved when all child-directed marketing and practices are addressed and the foods and beverages marketed meet strong nutrition criteria.¹⁷ For example:

If an ad for flavored yogurts high in sugar and other additives focuses primarily on a contest and only briefly depicts a variety of flavored yogurts, then all flavored yogurts should meet nutrition criteria.

If a fast-food restaurant kids' meals ad focuses primarily on a toy premium rather than a depicted meal, all fast-food restaurant kids' meals would need to meet nutrition criteria.

A fast-food restaurant mascot could only appear at events in schools if all of the fast food restaurant's products met nutrition criteria.

Responsible food and beverage marketing is an opportunity to establish positive eating and physical activity habits in children and adolescents that can ultimately reduce their risk for cancer and maintain and improve their health over the course of their lifetime.¹⁸

For additional information on Responsible Food Marketing to Children and Adolescents please visit <http://www.acscan.org/obesity/healthy-choices/>.

¹ American Cancer Society. *Cancer Facts & Figures 2015*. Atlanta: American Cancer Society; 2015.

² Ibid.

³ Kushi LH, Doyle C, McCullough M, et al. American Cancer Society Guidelines on Nutrition and Physical Activity for Cancer Prevention: Reducing the Risk of Cancer with Healthy Food Choices and Physical Activity. *Ca Cancer J Clin* 2012; 62(4):30-67.

⁴ Healthy Eating Research. Recommendations for Responsible Food Marketing to Children. Minneapolis, MN: Healthy Eating Research; 2015. Retrieved from: <http://healthyeatingresearch.org/?p=3108>. Accessed December 18, 2015.

⁵ American Cancer Society. Comment Letter to Federal Trade Commission on "Interagency Working Group on Food Marketed: Proposed Nutrition Principles FTC Project No. P094513". 2014. Available online at <http://www.acscan.org/content/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/ACS-CAN-Comments-on-IWG-Proposed-Nutrition-Principles-for-Food-Marketing.pdf>

⁶ Hawkes C. Marketing activities of global soft drink and fast food companies in emerging markets: a review. *Globalization, diets and noncommunicable diseases*. 2002:1-78.

⁷ Healthy Eating Research. Recommendations for Responsible Food Marketing to Children. Minneapolis, MN: Healthy Eating Research; 2015. Available online at: <http://healthyeatingresearch.org/?p=3108>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Harris JL, Heard A, Schwartz MB. Older but still vulnerable: All children need protection from unhealthy food marketing. Yale Rudd Center, 2014. Retrieved from: http://www.uconnruddcenter.org/files/Pdfs/Protecting_Older_Children_3_14.pdf. Accessed December 27, 2015.

¹⁰ Institute of Medicine. *Food Marketing to Children: Threat or Opportunity?* Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2006

¹¹ Shehan CV, Harris JL. Trends in Television Food Advertising to Young People: 2014 Update. March 2015 Retrieved from: <http://www.uconnruddcenter.org/files/Pdfs/TV%20ads%20trend%20update%202015.pdf>. Accessed December 27, 2015.

¹² Harris JL, Schwartz MB, Shehan CV, et al. Snack FACTS 2015 Evaluating snack food nutrition and marketing to youth November 2015. http://www.uconnruddcenter.org/files/Pdfs/SnackFACTS_2015_Fulldraft02.pdf. Accessed December 27, 2015.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Healthy Eating Research, 2015.

¹⁵ Council of Better Business Bureaus: Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative. *CFBAI's Category-Specific Uniform Nutrition Criteria*. 2013. Retrieved from: <http://www.bbb.org/storage/16/documents/cfbaifcfbaif%20Uniform%20Nutrition%20Criteria%20Fact%20Sheet%20-FINAL.pdf>. Accessed December 18, 2015.

¹⁶ Healthy Eating Research. Recommendations for Responsible Food Marketing to Children. Minneapolis, MN: Healthy Eating Research; 2015. Available at: <http://healthyeatingresearch.org/?p=3108>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Healthy Eating Research, 2015.