

POSITION STATEMENT

Food Marketing to Children



Key messages

- Restricting unhealthy food* marketing to children has been recognised as an important area for action in the prevention of obesity.¹ Systematic reviews have found that children are not fully aware of the persuasive intent of food marketing and that food marketing influences the food preferences of children, generates positive beliefs about the foods advertised, influences purchase requests of children, and influences children's food consumption.²⁻⁴
- Research on food marketing to children from Australia has focused primarily on measuring exposure to television food advertising.⁵ This research has consistently shown that children are exposed to high levels of unhealthy food advertisements on television. However, a small body of research also exists relating to food marketing using other non-broadcast media, which similarly demonstrates a high level of unhealthy food marketing to children.
- Cancer Council recommends that Government develop specific food marketing regulations which restrict the marketing to children of unhealthy food and beverage, determined using nutrient profiling, across all media. Importantly, any regulatory system must reflect children's media use, including the broadcast periods when the highest numbers of children are watching or using media, and the types of persuasive marketing techniques used to target children. To ensure the fidelity of regulations, these should be actively monitored and enforced.

Background

Obesity is a risk factor for cancers of the oesophagus, pancreas, bowel, endometrium, kidney and breast (postmenopausal women only).⁶ Childhood obesity has reached alarming levels in Australia, with almost a quarter of all children and adolescents either overweight or obese.⁷ A high proportion of overweight children will go on to be overweight in adulthood, so preventing weight gain in children is very important.⁸ The factors contributing to childhood overweight and obesity are multifaceted and include a combination of sociological, environmental and genetic influences. The marketing of unhealthy food to children has been recognised as one such factor contributing to the 'obesogenic' or obesity promoting environment. In fact, a joint report by the Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Health Organization concluded that the heavy marketing of fast food outlets and energy dense, micronutrient poor foods and beverages is a *probable* causal factor in childhood overweight and obesity, and is a target for future interventions.¹

There have been at least five major systematic reviews of the scientific evidence relating to the impact of food marketing to children.^{2-4,9,10} In 2006, a systematic review prepared for the World Health Organization, which is considered the most comprehensive study of its type conducted to date, found that food advertising to children affects food choices and influences dietary habits, with subsequent implications for weight gain and obesity, and that these effects operate at both the brand and food category level.⁴ These findings are concerning as advertised foods are typically the antithesis of dietary recommendations, with the most commonly advertised foods being for energy dense, nutrient poor foods such as pre-sugared breakfast cereals, savoury snacks, fast food restaurants, confectionery and soft drinks.⁴

* In this position statement, the term unhealthy food refers to unhealthy foods and beverages as determined by the nutrient profiling model put forward by Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ)

Further, there is substantial evidence from psychological research that children are highly vulnerable to advertising and marketing. Children are unable to interpret advertising messages critically as they lack the necessary cognitive skills and experience. The American Psychological Association has concluded that most children do not comprehend that the purpose of advertising is to persuade consumers until at least the age of eight years.¹¹ In effect, children cannot effectively evaluate advertising, and tend to accept advertising as truthful, accurate and unbiased. However, even at older ages, children's ability to understand advertising's intent tends to be only rudimentary. While children may understand that advertising is intended to sell a product, they may not be able to recognise the inherent biases in persuasive messages nor interpret these messages critically.¹¹

Restricting unhealthy food marketing to children has been demonstrated as a cost effective obesity intervention. According to the Assessing Cost Effectiveness of Obesity Report, a modelling study commissioned by Victoria's Department of Human Services, a restriction of unhealthy food advertising on television was potentially the most cost effective and cost saving intervention of 13 interventions assessed for preventing and managing childhood obesity.¹² Whilst this intervention is predicted to reduce individual children's risk of obesity to only a small degree, the restriction of advertisements for unhealthy foods and beverages to children would have considerable beneficial effects over the entire population. In addition to these direct measures, food marketing is likely to have broader indirect effects on children's food preferences and food choices.¹³

Like the tobacco industry, the food industry has adopted pervasive advertising and marketing strategies.¹⁴ The regulation of tobacco, in particular sale and promotion, is a major advocacy priority for the Cancer Council. Lessons learned from tobacco control can be transferred to advocacy efforts for food marketing to children.

Policy context for food marketing to children

The current mixed regulatory system concerning food marketing to children in Australia does not provide a coordinated system, but rather a complex and confusing arrangement, with inefficiencies in terms of enforcement, monitoring and complaints.

Current statutory regulations for food marketing to children apply only to television advertising. The Children's Television Standards (CTS), under the remit of the Australian Communications and Media Authority, are very limited in scope, covering only commercial free-to-air television, and exclude the increasingly popular subscription television.¹⁵ The CTS only applies during 'C' and 'P' programs (approximately 30 minutes per day), when in reality the majority of children watch television outside of these times, and for longer periods of time. Television audience rating data indicate that child (0-14 years) audience numbers on commercial free-to-air television peak between 7.00pm and 8.00pm, and with large numbers of children still watching until 9pm.¹⁶ During these peak broadcast periods there are no standards to limit the number of advertisements for unhealthy foods.

The Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice, promulgated by Free TV Australia, also applies to free-to-air television,¹⁷ however only one clause specifically relates to food advertising, and relates narrowly to prohibiting misleading advertising and advertising that expressly discourages an active lifestyle or healthy eating habits. This Code does not limit the types of foods that can be advertised to children, the marketing techniques most commonly used, or the volume of these advertisements.

In addition, the *Trade Practices Act 1974 (Commonwealth)* and state/territory consumer protection laws apply to food advertising. To date the *Trade Practices Act* has been used to protect consumers from potentially misleading and deceptive claims in food marketing and packaging, such as suggestions by Coca-Cola that Coke cannot contribute to weight gain or tooth decay and claims by Uncle Toby's that its Roll Ups are "made with 65% real fruit". However, to date the provisions relating to misleading and deceptive conduct have not been used to protect consumers from selective claims in food advertising, that is the promotion of nutrients or other characteristics of a product which may be perceived to provide health

benefits (i.e. low fat, high calcium), while failing to disclose other characteristics of the product which make it unhealthy overall (i.e. high sugar, low dietary fibre). This practice is likely to mislead consumers by creating an overall impression that a product is healthy and may drive the consumption of unhealthy food.

While some food and advertising industry self-regulatory codes also exist, and extend beyond television advertising, these codes typically contain many loopholes, use very broad nutrition criteria to classify unhealthy foods, do not restrict the volume of food advertisements to children, are only adopted by a minority of industry groups and have no independent monitoring or meaningful sanctions for non-compliance.

In addition to this, recently, the food industry has developed two new self-regulatory codes covering food marketing to children; the Responsible Children’s Marketing Initiative, established by the Australian Food and Grocery Council, and the Australian Quick Service Restaurant Industry Initiative for Responsible Advertising and Marketing to Children, established by quick service (fast food) restaurants. Similarly, these codes also contain significant loopholes and impose few restrictions to signatory companies beyond that contained in the preceding advertising industry codes.

In 2009, the National Preventative Health Taskforce recommended that a ban on the marketing of unhealthy food and drinks to children before 9pm be phased in within four years.¹⁸

Internationally, the World Health Assembly resolved, as part of the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases: Implementation of the Global Strategy, "to promote initiatives aimed at implementing the global strategy with the purpose of increasing availability of healthy food and promoting healthy diets and healthy eating habits and to promote responsible marketing including the development of a set of recommendations on the marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children, in order to reduce the impact of foods high in saturated fats, trans-fatty acids, free sugars, or salt, in dialogue with all relevant stakeholders, including private sector parties, while ensuring avoidance of potential conflict of interest". Draft recommendations are expected in January 2010.

Research on Food Marketing to Children

In Australia, children are exposed to high volumes of unhealthy food marketing through an array of marketing media. Cancer Council, in collaboration with researchers at the University of Sydney, has developed a framework to classify studies relating to food marketing according to their major research focus, as either:

- Exposure: content analyses of media types;
- Effects of exposure: opinions, attitudes and actions as a result of food marketing;
- Regulations: the type and level of regulation that applies to food marketing; and
- Breaches of regulations: instances where marketing regulations have been violated.⁵

This research framework has been used to summarise available Australian research relating to food marketing to children, and to determine knowledge gaps to target in future research (Table 1).

Table 1: The availability of Australian research for each research level and media type

Media Type	Exposure	Effects of Exposure	Regulations	Breaches of Regulations
Free-to-air television	✓ 19-26	✓ 27-32	✓ 33,34	✓ 20,35,36
Subscription/pay television	✗	✓ 37	✗	NA
Internet	✓ 38-40	✓ 37,41	✗	NA
Print media	✓ 42	✓ 37,41	✗	NA
Promotions	✓ 38,43	✓ 41	✗	NA
Place	✓ 44,45	✓ 41	✗	NA
Price	✗	✗	✗	NA
Packaging	✓ 43	✓ 41	✗	NA

Product expansion	X	X	X	NA
Public relations and sponsorships	X	✓ ⁴¹	X	NA

Not applicable (NA) as no statutory regulations apply specifically to this media

X = no studies available

✓ = studies available

i. Television advertising: exposure

In 2005, Cancer Council NSW conducted the largest Australian study to measure the frequency of food advertising to children on free-to-air television assessing 645 hours of television data.²⁰ Unhealthy food advertisements contributed to 82% of all food advertisements.²⁰

These findings are supported by later studies which assessed food advertising on Sydney commercial television (357 hours).^{22,24} The frequency of unhealthy food advertisements were consistently highest during programs most popular with children. In 2006, during the 20 most popular children's programs, 66% of food advertisements were for unhealthy foods, compared to 42% during programs most popular with adults.²⁴ In 2007, 73% of food advertisements during popular children's programs were for unhealthy foods.²²

These data were also used to assess the use of persuasive marketing techniques, including promotional characters and premium offers.²³ The frequency of food advertisements with promotional characters was twice as high, and those with premium offers were 18 times higher, during children's popular programs, compared to the programs most popular with adults.²³

More recently, the consumer organisation Choice assessed one week of Sydney free-to-air television for the presence of food advertisements.²¹ These food advertisements were subsequently categorised using the Food Standards Australia New Zealand nutrient profiling system, to classify these as either healthy or unhealthy, and not suitable to be advertised to children. The majority of food advertisements during this broadcast period were for unhealthy foods (54%), and this increased during many of the most popular programs with children aged 0 to 14 years.²¹

ii. Television advertising: effects of exposure

In 2007, a random, nationwide survey of 400 Australian parents found 86% supported a ban on unhealthy food advertising during times when children watch television.³² Findings from this survey are consistent with other surveys relating to adults' views on television food advertising to children.^{30,31} As well, qualitative research with both parents and children has concluded that food marketing is a pervasive influence on children's food preferences and purchase requests.²⁷⁻²⁹

More recently, a survey of 800 main grocery buyers across Australia indicated that 87% were in favour of government regulation of unhealthy food advertising to children on subscription/pay television.³⁷

To date, there have been no Australian intervention studies that directly measure the effects of advertising on children's food purchasing or food consumption behaviours. However a cross-sectional survey of n=919 year 5 and 6 students found that heavier television use and more frequent commercial television viewing were independently associated with more positive attitudes toward junk food, and heavier television use was also independently associated with higher reported junk food consumption.²⁷

iii. Television advertising: regulations

A study that applied different regulatory scenarios to television advertising data from Sydney, found that relatively simple regulatory changes could potentially have a large impact on children's exposure to unhealthy food advertising.³⁴ The most effective regulatory scenario was a restriction of unhealthy food

advertisements between 07:00 and 20:30 daily, which was predicted to reduce children's exposure to unhealthy food advertising by 80%.

Economic modelling undertaken by the Australian Communications and Media Authority, indicated that revenue loss for broadcasters would increase if restrictions were placed on all food advertisements to children, as opposed to only unhealthy food advertisements, and when regulations were enforced for extended broadcast periods.³³ Of note, the Office of Communications in the United Kingdom have examined the impact of a recent ban on unhealthy television food advertising to children on the advertising revenue of children's channels, and found that there was no decline in overall advertising expenditure.⁴⁶

iv. Television advertising: breaches of regulations

Studies have highlighted the ineffectiveness of the CTS arising from the lack of active monitoring and enforcement. In one study which analysed 63 hours of children's television programming (2001), 31% of food advertisements broadcast during children's programs, were found to be in breach of the CTS.³⁶ In another study (2005), a total 194 breaches of the CTS were identified in 645 hours of television.²⁰ Lastly, in a study examining 357 hours of Sydney commercial television (2006), 14 breaches of CTS 16 were observed.³⁵ CTS 16 refers to the frequency of food advertisements, and stipulates that food advertisements must be shown no more than twice per 30-minute period.

v. Non-broadcast media marketing: exposure

Internet

An analysis of 196 popular children's websites, and 119 food manufacturer's websites highlighted the major marketing techniques used on the Internet as branded education, competitions, promotional characters, downloadable items, branded games and designated children's sections.⁴⁰ Other Australian research has also examined the use of Internet marketing, including the use of branded games, electronic cards, downloadable items and viral marketing.³⁸

Research has also examined the extent of food marketing on websites for five popular Australian children's magazines.³⁹ Over a six week monitoring period, all of the websites were found to be either sponsored by a food company or contain food advertising and/or promotions, including competitions, games, quizzes, recipes, links to the food product's website and other activities. The majority of this food marketing was for non-core foods.³⁹

Print media

A study of popular children's magazines ($n = 76$), reviewed over a 12-month period identified that food references were significantly skewed towards unhealthy foods (64% vs. 36% healthy foods).⁴²

Promotions/packaging

A study on the extent of packaging promotions in Australian supermarkets found that for seven food product categories, between 9% and 35% of products used either promotional characters or premium offers.⁴³ Further, 82% of food promotions were for unhealthy foods. Other research has also described the use of on-pack promotions, including the use of children's characters, movie tie-ins, competitions and give aways.³⁸

Place

An analysis of food advertising around 40 primary schools in NSW found that food advertisements were skewed towards unhealthy foods (80% of food advertisements), and were twice as concentrated in areas closest to schools.⁴⁵

Research has also examined the extent of unhealthy food at supermarket checkouts in Melbourne ($n = 24$), and found that the majority of checkouts displayed chocolate (87%), chewing gum (81%) and other confectionery (80%).⁴⁴

vi. Non-broadcast media marketing: effects of exposure

Two nationwide telephone surveys have assessed adults' awareness and concern about a range of non-broadcast media marketing strategies.

In 2007, in a telephone survey conducted by the Coalition on Food Advertising to Children, a random sample of 400 NSW parents, who were responsible for grocery purchases in their household, were asked about their attitudes relating to food marketing to children, including non-broadcast media marketing, and the perceived role of government versus industry in food marketing regulation.⁴¹ The majority of parents were concerned about food marketing to children, with the highest level of concern registered for the positioning of food at supermarket checkouts (83% of parents concerned). Further, the majority of parents (81%) believed that the government should restrict the use of non-broadcast media marketing of unhealthy food to children.⁴¹

In 2008, a national survey of 800 main grocery buyers, conducted by the Obesity Policy Coalition, found that the majority of participants were in favour of government regulating games and competitions on websites that promote unhealthy food to children (91%), the use of SMS or email by junk food companies to contact children (96%), and unhealthy food advertising to children in magazines (95%).³⁷

Policy Recommendations

Reform of food marketing regulations is a priority public health goal. Children deserve to be protected from the potential harms of food marketing and parents deserve to raise their children in an environment that is conducive to the development of healthy eating practices.

To better protect children from unhealthy food marketing, Cancer Council recommends that Government develop a specific food marketing policy framework and embed this in statutory regulation. This government regulation should:

1. Apply to unhealthy food and beverage products, as determined using an appropriate nutrient profiling model, such as the one developed by Food Standards Australia New Zealand for restricting health claims on food packaging.
2. Restrict all marketing media used to target children aged under 16 years, including both broadcast and non-broadcast media.
3. Adequately reflect children's media use, so restrictions apply to broadcast periods when the highest numbers of children are watching. Specifically, restrictions on commercial television food advertising should apply between 7am to 9am and 4pm to 9pm weekdays and 7am to 9pm on weekends.
4. Restrict persuasive marketing techniques, such as the use of promotional characters and premium offers.
5. Be monitored by an independent statutory body, with a clear and transparent monitoring and enforcement processes.
6. Be subject to regular reviews to ensure that it covers emerging technologies and techniques used to reach children.
7. Contain significant and meaningful penalties.

Cancer Council strongly supports the recommendations made by the National Preventative Health Taskforce to phase in a ban on the marketing of unhealthy food and drinks to children before 9pm. However, we believe the evidence linking food marketing to childhood obesity is sufficiently compelling to warrant that this ban be enacted as speedily as possible, rather than within the four years suggested by the Taskforce. Cancer Council does not support industry self regulation of food marketing as to date it has not adequately addressed either the volume of food advertising to children or the persuasive marketing techniques commonly used to target children.

Future Research

While there is sufficient research to underpin and guide policy actions to restrict food marketing to children, particularly on TV, further research is required to gauge the full range of exposures of children to food marketing and monitor patterns over time, as well as to study potential and actual policy arrangements, through modelling and evaluation respectively. Based on the above research framework, clear knowledge gaps are evident. These gaps should be addressed in order to guide future priorities and inform policy. Future research should focus on:

- Quantifying the nature and extent of food related sponsorships of children's sports;
- Measuring consumer responses to specific marketing media;
- Detailed research on potential policy arrangements, such as modelling of impacts and costs of policy options; and
- Evaluating the efficacy of industry self-regulatory codes in reducing children's exposure to unhealthy food marketing.

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