

# Children see more fast food TV ads, fewer sweets and beverage ads - study

Children saw fewer television advertisements for certain foods, including those for sweets and beverages, in 2007 compared with 2003, according to a report posted online today that will appear in the September print issue of *Archives of Paediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, one of the JAMA/Archives journals. However, children now see more fast-food ads, and racial gaps in exposure to all food advertising have increased.

An Institute of Medicine (IOM) report concluded that there was strong evidence that television advertising influences the short-term eating habits of children age 2 to 11, and moderate evidence that advertising influences their usual dietary intake, according to background information in the article. In 2006, 10 major US food companies pledged to devote at least half of their child-targeted advertising to healthier products or encouraging good nutrition and healthy lifestyles, an effort called the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative. By 2009, 16 companies had signed on. "Given that each company defined their own better-for-you products and also had different definitions of what constituted children's programming, key questions remain," the authors write.

## Decrease in daily average exposure to TV food ads

To assess trends in food advertising before and after the initiative, Lisa M. Powell, Ph.D., and colleagues at the University of Illinois at Chicago studied television ratings data from Nielsen Media Research for the calendar years 2003, 2005 and 2007.

Between 2003 and 2007, daily average exposure to televised food ads decreased by 13.7% among children age 2 to 5 and 3.7% among children age 6 to 11, but increased by 3.7% among teens age 12 to 17. Ads for sweets became less frequent, with a 41% decrease in exposure for 2- to 5-year-olds, 29.3% for 6- to 11-year-olds and 12.1% for 12- to 17-year-olds. Beverage ads also decreased in frequency, by about 27% to 30% across age groups, with substantial decreases in exposure to ads for previously heavily advertised sugar-sweetened beverages.

However, exposure to fast-food ads increased between 2003 and 2007, with a 4.7% increase in viewings among children age 2 to 5, 12.2% among children 6 to 11 and 20.4% among teens age 12 to 17.

## Importance of branding

The high prevalence of these ads suggests the importance of branding, the authors note. "Indeed, children have been found to recognise brand logos at very young ages and a recent study found that preschoolers exhibited significantly higher preferences for food and beverage items in branded vs. plain packaging," they write.

The racial gap in advertising also increased in this time period. By 2007, African American children saw 1.4 to 1.6 times as many food ads per day than white children, depending on their age. "In particular, African American children and teens had more than double the rate of increase in exposure to fast food ads compared with their white counterparts," the authors write.

"A number of positive changes have occurred in children's exposure to food advertising," they conclude. "Continued monitoring of children's television food ad exposure along with nutritional assessments of advertised products will improve understanding of the extent to which self-regulation can translate into a reduction in the promotion of unhealthy food products."

Source: JAMA and Archives Journals

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