

# Cutting children's exposure to unhealthy food advertisements

Ofcom has introduced regulations banning the advertising of foods which are high in fat, salt and sugar during children's TV programming. Researchers from the Fuse research centre found that the overall amount of unhealthy food advertisements seen by children is the same as before the ban.

For some years, policymakers have been debating the best ways to reduce levels of obesity, which have been rising rapidly in recent years. Being overweight is associated with a range of health conditions including heart disease, cancer, respiratory disease and diabetes. Research evidence shows food advertising – which tends to promote products high in fat, salt and sugar – can have a significant influence on children's diet. In 2010 the World Health Organization published a set of recommendations outlining measures against the impact of unhealthy food marketing on children.

Earlier, in 2007, the UK regulator Ofcom introduced regulations banning the advertising of foods high in fat, salt and sugar on children's television channels. It also banned the advertising of such foods on non-children's channels during, before and after programmes which were aimed at children aged between four and 15. The UK was the first country to introduce statutory scheduling restrictions of food advertisements to children.

Researchers from Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, compared all advertisements broadcast in the Tyne Tees region of the UK during one week in 2006 – six months before the new regulations began to be implemented – with those broadcast during one week in 2009, six months after the implementation was complete. They used viewing figures to determine how many people watched each advertisement, and cross-checked those against nutritional information to determine which advertisements were for unhealthy foods.

The research findings suggest the restrictions on advertising

of foods which are high in salt, sugar or saturated fat have not proved effective. The ban did not lead to any reduction in the proportion of ads for unhealthy food seen by children.

Broadcasters operated the ban effectively, the research found, but children continued to see television advertising of unhealthy foods on adult television channels and while watching programmes which were not specifically targeted at children.

## Key findings

- There was almost universal adherence to the restrictions by broadcasters.
- Although food advertising in general decreased after the ban, the proportion of unhealthy food advertisements increased – so the overall screen time of unhealthy food ads seen by children remained the same as before.
- Six months before the ban, 43.2 per cent of food advertising seen by children was for these types of food, while six months afterwards the proportion was 55.7 per cent.
- After full implementation of the scheduling restrictions, almost two-thirds (60.4 per cent) of all television food advertising seen in the UK was for unhealthy foods - compared to less than half (38.6 per cent) six months before the regulations were implemented.
- In total, just over half (51.1 per cent) of the food advertising and one thirteenth (7.5 per cent) of all the advertising looked at in the study was for unhealthy foods.
- The exposure of children to unhealthy food advertising remained the same despite an almost universal adherence to the ban. This is explained by the fact that children watched a wider range of television programmes than just those targeted at them and hence affected by the regulations.

## Policy relevance and implications

- The scheduling restrictions introduced in 2007 appear to have been flawed from the outset because they focused on only a subset of all advertisements that children were exposed to.
- To be effective, the restrictions would need to be applied to a much wider range of television programmes – for example, all those aired before 9pm. A time-based 'watershed' would enable the restrictions to apply to a far greater proportion of the television which is likely to be watched by children.
- Guidance from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence can be used as a basis for regulations. The guidance proposes advertisements for foods with high levels of salt, sugar or fat should be shown only after 9pm. Evidence shows that such a move would reduce children's exposure to this type of advertising by 82 per cent.
- Current regulations prohibit less healthy food advertising during programmes 'of particular appeal to children', based on the proportion of viewers who are children. Another option would be to widen the definition on which this is based, so that a greater proportion of programmes are covered by the regulations.

*Although food advertising in general decreased after the Ofcom ban, the proportion of unhealthy food advertisements increased*

### BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

Researchers from Fuse, a UKCRC Public Health Research Centre of Excellence, used viewing figures to monitor the effectiveness of a ban on unhealthy food advertising on children's television. They found that while the ban was fully enforced, it did not lead to a reduction in the amount of unhealthy food advertising seen by children. This was because children also watched TV during adult viewing hours.

Jean Adams, Rachel Tyrrell, Ashley J Adamson and Martin White: Effect of Restrictions on Television Food Advertising to Children on Exposure to Advertisements for 'Less Healthy' Foods: Repeat Cross-Sectional Study  
Web: [www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0031578](http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0031578)

### FURTHER INFORMATION

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Fuse is one of five UKCRC Public Health Research Centres of Excellence. The ESRC is one of the research centre's core funders.  
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