

Cancer Research UK Policy Statement

Advertising and promotion of food and drink to children

The advertising and promotion of healthy food choices offers a valuable opportunity to encourage good diet.

However, there is currently a stark imbalance between the recommended diet and the advertised diet. Between 80-90% of food advertisements currently targeted at children are for products high in fat, salt or sugar and though television advertising of food to children is declining slightly each year, the balance of advertising has not shifted towards the promotion of a healthier diet.

Cancer Research UK believes that the present situation is unacceptable and is supportive of action on the promotion of food and drink in this area. We believe that restrictions on advertising will have a positive impact on children's diets.

The balance of evidence illustrates that advertising does affect children's food preferences, the food and drink that they purchase and their consumption patterns. In order to change consumption patterns, restrictions must be in place when large numbers of children are likely to be watching television.

We responded to the 2006 Office of Communications (Ofcom) consultation, *Television Advertising of Food and Drink Products to Children: Options for new restrictions*, highlighting support for broadcast restrictions on the promotion of food and drink products high in fat, sugar or salt¹ to the 9pm watershed.

We fully understand that the advertising and promotion of food on television is only one medium used to reach children and that restricting TV advertising of foods to children will not be effective in isolation. It is important that efforts are made to change the balance of advertising of food and drink to children across all media.

¹ Cancer Research UK is particularly concerned about high fat and sugar foods, because of their link to obesity, and subsequently cancer. However, for the purposes of the Ofcom review, high fat, sugar and salt foods were considered together and we therefore made comments to the consultation based on this categorisation.

Background

After smoking, an unhealthy diet and excess bodyweight are the most important modifiable risk factors for cancer. Researchers estimate that a third of all cancers are caused by poor diet, alcohol consumption and obesity.^{2,3,4} Obesity and overweight in children and adolescence can increase the risk of cancer in later life. Eating habits established in childhood often endure after many years. Several studies have shown that obese children are more likely to become obese adults.^{5,6}

Rates of childhood obesity have dramatically increased over the last decade. In England, levels of childhood obesity have risen from 11% in 1995 to 19% in 2004 among boys aged 2-10, and from 12% in 1995 to 18% in 2004 among girls across the same age range.⁷ Further, childhood obesity levels are not only increasing among younger children. The latest Government figures show that around a quarter of 11-15 year olds are now obese.⁸

Cancer Research UK believes that the prevention of obesity in children is an essential part of cancer and other chronic disease prevention and is supportive of appropriate initiatives to enable consumers to make healthy choices more easily.

We believe that a multi-faceted obesity prevention strategy is necessary to tackle existing and projected trends, including initiatives that seek to increase the level of physical activity among children and improve their diets. Restricting the advertising of foods which are high in fat, salt or sugar to children is one important strand of the multifaceted approach needed.

There is clear evidence that advertising affects children's behaviour. The systematic review of food promotion to children, commissioned by the Food Standards Agency in 2003, concluded that 'food promotion can and is having an effect on children, particularly in the areas of food preferences, purchase behaviour and consumption...these effects are significant, independent of other influences and operate at both a brand and category level.'⁹ Subsequent research reinforces this view.^{10,11} Ofcom's 2006 consultation document highlighted that although the estimates of the direct effect of advertising on children's food preferences may be modest in statistical terms, 'cumulatively this may make an appreciable difference to the number of children who fall into the 'obese category' and may be 'no smaller than some other important influences on Body Mass Index (BMI).'¹²

² Doll, R. & Peto, R. The causes of cancer: quantitative estimates of avoidable risks of cancer in the United States today. *J Natl Cancer inst* 66, 1191-308 (1981).

³ WCRF & AICR. 37-145 (American Institute for Cancer Research, Washington, 1997).

⁴ Willett, W. Diet, nutrition and avoidable cancer. *Environ Health Perspect* 103 Suppl 8, 165-70.

⁵ Guo, S., Roche, S., Chumlea, W., Gardner, J. & Siervogel, R. The predictive value of childhood body mass index values for overweight at age 35y. *Am J Clin Nutr* 59, 810-9 (1994).

⁶ Whitaker, R., Wright, J., Pepe, M., Seidel, K., & Dietz, W. Predicting obesity in young adulthood from childhood and parental obesity. *N Engl J med* 337, 869-73 (1997).

⁷ Health Survey for England 2004. Updating of trend tables to include childhood obesity data. Publication date 21 April (2006).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Food Standards Agency. Does food promotion influence children? A systematic review of the evidence (2003).

¹⁰ Ofcom. Childhood Obesity- Food Advertising in Context. Children's food choices, parents' understanding and influence, and the role of food promotions. Ofcom (2004).

¹¹ Livingstone, S. Does TV advertising make children fat? What the evidence tells us. *IPPR Public Policy Research* 13, iss 1, 54-61 (2006).

¹² Ofcom. Television advertising of food and drink products to children, Options for new restrictions. Ofcom (2006).

It is imperative that any measures to restrict the advertising of food and drink products high in fat, sugar or salt to children are regularly reviewed to ensure appropriateness and effectiveness.