

# Research finds Australian supermarket catalogues promote unhealthy eating

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Research finds supermarkets are putting the junk in junk mail

Unhealthy foods are the most promoted items in Australian supermarket catalogues, according to an analysis by Deakin University obesity prevention researchers.

In a study published in the journal *Health Promotion International*, the researchers from Deakin University's WHO Collaborating Centre for Obesity Prevention assessed the catalogue content of the four leading Australian chains (Coles, Woolworths, Aldi, IGA). Across all the chains combined, they found the majority of the foods advertised (66 per cent) were not among the core foods recommended for a healthy diet.

"The results of this study suggest that supermarket catalogues contribute towards an environment that supports unhealthy eating behavior," said Dr Adrian Cameron, a senior research fellow with the Centre.

"A clear opportunity exists for supermarkets to be part of the solution to the growing burden of diet-related disease by having their catalogues promote healthier foods."

For the study the researchers compared the foods advertised in 12 weeks of catalogues from Coles, Woolworths, Aldi and IGA. The products were grouped into four categories based on the Australian Guide to Healthy Eating:

- foods in the five core food groups that should be consumed daily and in wide variety such as, fruits, vegetables, dairy, meat, grains and water;
- discretionary foods that should be eaten only sometimes, such as soft drinks, confectionary and chocolate, chips, desserts and ice creams, unhealthy ready meals, processed meats, jams, energy drinks, cordial, fats and oils;
- alcohol;
- and, other foods including products such as tea, coffee, natural sweeteners, salad dressing, sauces, salt, breakfast spreads, infant food products, herbs and spices.

Overall, 34.2 per cent of advertised foods were in the five core food

groups recommended for daily consumption, 43.3 per cent were discretionary foods, 8.5 per cent were alcohol, with the remaining 14 per cent categorised as 'other'.

The percentage of advertised foods in the five core food groups recommended for daily consumption was lower for Coles (29.3 per cent) than for Woolworths (38.3 per cent), Aldi (33.2 per cent) and IGA (36 per cent). Coles also had a higher percentage of discretionary items and alcohol in their catalogues (60.3 per cent) than IGA (52.4 per cent), Woolworths (50.7 per cent) and Aldi (43.1 per cent).

"With guidelines suggesting that discretionary foods should only constitute a small component of the total diet, these results show that supermarket catalogues are clearly incompatible with dietary recommendations," Dr Cameron said.

The researchers found that the content of the Australian catalogues is consistent with those of many other countries.

In a separate study published in the leading international journal *Preventive Medicine*, the researchers also analysed the content of catalogues from the major supermarket chains in 12 countries: Australia, United States of America, United Kingdom, Canada, Hong Kong, India, Malaysia, New Zealand, Philippines, Singapore, South Africa and Sweden. Again, products were grouped into four categories based on the Australian Guide to Healthy Eating.

Unhealthy food was particularly prominent in catalogues from most countries. The only exceptions were the Philippines (no [unhealthy foods](#)) and India (11 per cent unhealthy food). Circulars from Hong Kong store Park'N'Shop promoted the greatest proportion of unhealthy food and alcohol (69 per cent), with circular content from Asda (UK, 61 per cent), Kroger (USA, 57 per cent), Coles and Woolworths (Australia 54 per

cent) and Giant (Malaysia, 51 per cent) all including more than half unhealthy food and alcohol.

Supermarkets are a major source of food in most high-income countries and increasingly in middle- and low-income countries too. These findings support previous work by this team that found supermarkets worldwide heavily promote unhealthy foods at key sites in-store, such as end-of-aisle and checkout displays.

"We believe the promotion of unhealthy foods by supermarkets could be a major barrier to halting the global obesity epidemic. Efforts to restrict unhealthy [food](#) marketing should also focus on supermarkets," Dr Cameron said.

**More information:** Adrian J. Cameron et al. Do the foods advertised in Australian supermarket catalogues reflect national dietary guidelines?, *Health Promotion International* (2015). [DOI: 10.1093/heapro/dav089](https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/dav089)

Emma L. Charlton et al. Supermarkets and unhealthy food marketing: An international comparison of the content of supermarket catalogues/circulars, *Preventive Medicine* (2015). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ypmed.2015.08.023](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2015.08.023)

Provided by Deakin University

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