

Food adverts in your magazine: how healthy are they?

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(PhysOrg.com) -- At a time when many of us are thinking about how to get rid of a few extra pounds, research at Newcastle University has shown that even the magazine you read may affect how healthy your diet is.

In the first-ever study of food adverts in UK magazines, researchers found them filled with sugary, salt-filled options often contradicting the health messages the articles were trying to put across.

“Nearly every magazine contains advice on a healthier lifestyle, yet we found the food adverts were for products high in sugar and salt and low in fibre such as ready meals, sauces and confectionary,” explains Dr Jean Adams, lecturer in public health at Newcastle University, who led the study.

“Obviously, it’s up to each of us to decide what we eat but if we’re constantly bombarded with images of unhealthy food every time we pick up a magazine then we’re going to be swayed in what we choose,” she adds.

It means that women sitting down to enjoy the treat of a cup of tea, a chocolate bar and a magazine may unwittingly be tempted to an even unhealthier diet.

What’s in the ads?

Newcastle University researchers collected and compared data on the nutritional content of the foods advertised in 30 most widely-read weekly magazines during November 2007.

A detailed nutritional analysis of the foods in the adverts found that the products advertised were generally much higher in sugar and salt, and lower in fibre than the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommendations.

The study published online today in the *European Journal of Public Health* shows that over a quarter of the food adverts (25.5%) were for ready-meals, sauces and soups which tend to be high in salt and sugar.

Almost one quarter (23%) of the foods advertised were categorised as “containing fat or sugar” including products such as ice-cream, chocolate bars, sweets and full sugar soft drinks. Government guidelines recommend these should be eaten only “sparingly”. More of these adverts were found in magazines with a higher proportion of women readers or readers of a lower social class. In contrast, very few of the ads, only 1.8%, were for fruit and vegetables and these were mainly in high-end magazines.

“Health bodies and the government are trying to encourage all of us to eat a healthier diet, yet we found that many of the magazines, especially those targeting lower-income families are full of adverts promoting food that is largely unhealthy,” says Dr Adams.

“Families are facing so many social pressures that it’s a constant battle to stay on the right track when choosing and preparing meals and these adverts are doing little to help.”

Paper: Socio-economic and gender differences in nutritional content of foods advertised in popular UK weekly magazines. Published in: *European Journal of Public Health*. doi:10.1093/eurpub/ckn132

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