

# TV bombards children with commercials for high-fat and high-sugar foods

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Childhood obesity in the United States is reaching epidemic proportions. With more than one fourth of advertising on daytime and prime time television devoted to foods and beverages and continuing questions about the role television plays in obesity, a study in the November/December issue of the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* examines how food advertising aimed at children might be a large contributor to the problem.

Researchers at the University of California-Davis examined the types of food advertisements seen by children watching English- and Spanish-language American television programs on Saturday mornings and weekday afternoons, which are high viewing times for children. Recordings were made of programs on twelve networks including highly rated children's cable channels Nickelodeon, [Cartoon Network](#), and Kids' WB, networks that appeal to older youths (MTV, BET), mainstream English-language channels ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, and UPN, and Univision and Telemundo, the two highest rated Spanish language channels.

Out of 5,724 commercials recorded, 1,162 were food-related, with 91.2% of food promotions in English, and 8.7% in Spanish. Only 1 commercial was bilingual. Overall, nearly 1 in 5 advertisements was for a food or nutrition-related product, with 5.2 food advertisements presented every hour. Fast-food restaurants, sugary food, chips/crackers, and sugar-added beverages collectively accounted for more than 70% of food commercials; 34% were for "food on the run," fast-food restaurants

and convenience food.

Children's networks had the highest percentage of food-related commercials. Food advertisements were predominately for sugary cereals and sweets, high fat food, convenience or fast-food restaurant food, and chips/crackers. When compared to television for a general audience, children's networks in this study exposed young viewers to 76% more food commercials per hour than did the other networks, with the Saturday morning 7-10 AM time slot being more saturated with food commercials. Approximately 7.7 food commercials per hour appeared in programming on the children's networks, which is approximately 1 food commercial every 8 minutes

As children move into adolescence and begin to watch more youth programming, such as the music video programming offered by BET and MTV, they continue to be exposed to advertisements for food in less-healthy categories. Eighty percent of MTV food commercials were for fast food restaurants, sugar-added beverages, and sweets.

This is the first study of [food advertising](#) in Spanish-language American programming. Although the likelihood of an advertisement being for a food product did not differ between English- and Spanish- language networks, commercials on Spanish-language programming were more likely to be for alcohol and fast-food restaurants, which together account for a majority of the food commercials on these networks. These messages are being presented at a time when Hispanics in America are becoming increasingly obese.

In contrast, fruits, vegetables, and juices were advertised in only 1.7% of the commercials. Only one nutrition-related public service announcement was found for every 63 food ads.

Writing in the article, the authors state, "Study after study has

documented the adverse health effects of food advertising targeting children and adolescents. Health educators need to develop and evaluate comprehensive nutrition programs that augment nutritional education with media use reduction strategies to lessen exposure to ads. School- and family-based programs that have attempted to reduce children's media use have shown promise.

Reduced media use is insufficient by itself, for food advertising has increased in other types of media children use, such as the Internet. Thus efforts should also be made to introduce media literacy training into nutrition programs. Evaluations of nutrition-focused media literacy interventions have been rare. Such literacy training can help children and adolescents understand both the economic motivations behind food advertising and the strategies used by industry to increase desire for their products. Greater awareness of the potential influence of industry may immunize young people from [food](#) advertising's deleterious effects."

More information: The article is "Frequency and Types of Foods Advertised on Saturday Morning and Weekday Afternoon English- and Spanish-Language American Television Programs" by Robert A. Bell, PhD; Diana Cassady, DrPH; Jennifer Culp, MPH, RD; and Rina Alcalay, PhD. It appears in the Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior, Volume 41, Issue 6, (November/December 2009) published by Elsevier.

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