

New study examines the impact on children of food product placements in the movies

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New research from the Hood Center for Children and Families at Dartmouth Medical School (DMS) for the first time sheds light on the significant potential negative impact that food product placements in the movies could be having on children.

The study, which appears in the current edition of the journal *Pediatrics*, shows that most of the "brand placements" for food, beverage, and food retail establishments that are frequently portrayed in movies, are for energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods or product lines. In addition, the study shows for the first time that product placements in movies may be a far more potent source of advertising to children in terms of food choices than previously understood.

"The current situation in the United States is very serious in terms of the health of our children, and we have to look seriously at all of the factors that may be contributing to it, including the impact of product placements in movies," says Lisa Sutherland, Ph.D. the lead author of the study. Sutherland says that the diet quality of U.S. children and adolescents has declined markedly during the past 20 years, and current estimates suggest that only one percent of children eat a diet consistent with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) My-Pyramid food guidance. Additionally, fewer than one fifth of adolescents meet the dietary recommendations for fat or fruit and vegetable intakes, and during the last 20 years obesity rates have doubled for children aged 6 to 11 years and tripled for adolescents aged 12 to 19 years.

"While the issue of [food advertising](#) and its effect on children has been well documented in numerous studies, comparatively little is known about product placement in movies and how it affects the food and beverage preferences and choices of children and adolescents," Sutherland said. The study notes that while there are similarities between [television advertising](#) and movie product placement, such as the low nutritional quality of the majority of branded products, there are also interesting differences. Recent studies that examined television ads during adolescent programming found fast food and ready-to-eat cereals and cereal bars to be the most prevalent during children's programming. In contrast, the Dartmouth study found that sugar-sweetened beverages, comprised largely of soda, accounted for the largest proportion of all of the movie-based food product brand placements, accounting for one of every four brand placements overall.

The study notes that of particular concern are the food and beverage product placements in comedies and PG-rated and PG-13-rated movies, which are often geared specifically to older children and teenagers, who are at an age where they are gaining independence with respect to their food choices. Although the impact of this type of advertising on children is not fully known, it provides a likely avenue by which brand loyalty and product preference can be built in addition to eating patterns. The study also revealed that six companies accounted for 45 percent of all brand placements and included PepsiCo, Coca-Cola, Nestle USA, McDonald's, Dr. Pepper/Snapple Group and Burger King.

The study acknowledges that many companies have made pledges not to direct advertising at children in order to encourage healthier dietary choices, and that while this is a step in the right direction, more clearly needs to be done. In addition, the study's authors say that a number of studies to date that focused on other health-related behaviors, including alcohol and tobacco use, showed that movies contain frequent portrayals of these risk behaviors and often include brand appearances of the

products. They say it is well established that children who view these risk behaviors in movies are more likely to engage in the behavior themselves.

"This is an area of study which clearly requires more research," says Sutherland who was part of a team of advisers that, in 2006, helped to develop the Guiding Stars program used by supermarkets to help shoppers better identify the nutritional values of food products. "At a time in their development where [children](#) and adolescents are very susceptible to outside influences, we have to carefully examine the influence of all the factors that are combining to create what may end up being lifelong habits around food and lifestyle choices. Certainly, food-product placement in movies is one of many factors, but it is one that may be far more influential than previously realized and perhaps the least well understood."

Co-authors included Todd MacKenzie, Ph.D., Lisa A. Purvis, MPH, MBA, and Madeline Dalton, Ph.D. all with Dartmouth Medical School.

Provided by Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center

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