

TV food advertisements promote imbalanced diets

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Making food choices based on television advertising results in a very imbalanced diet according to a new study comparing the nutritional content of food choices influenced by television to nutritional guidelines published in the June issue of the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*.

Investigators found that a 2,000-calorie diet consisting entirely of advertised foods would contain 25 times the recommended servings of sugars and 20 times the recommended servings of fat, but less than half of the recommended servings of vegetables, dairy, and fruits. In fact, the excess of servings in sugars and fat is so large that, on average, eating just one of the observed food items would provide more than three times the recommended daily servings (RDS) for sugars and two and a half times the RDS for fat for the entire day.

"The results of this study suggest the foods advertised on television tend to oversupply nutrients associated with [chronic illness](#) (eg, saturated fat, cholesterol, and sodium) and undersupply nutrients that help protect against illness (eg, fiber, vitamins A, E, and D, calcium, and potassium)," according to lead investigator Michael Mink, PhD, Assistant Professor and MPH Program Coordinator, Armstrong Atlantic State University, Savannah, GA.

Researchers analyzed 84 hours of primetime and 12 hours of Saturday morning broadcast television over a 28-day period in 2004. ABC, CBS, Fox and NBC were sampled on a rotating basis to develop a complete

profile of each network. The Saturday-morning cartoon segment (from 8:00 am to 11:00 am) was included to capture food advertisements marketed primarily to children.

All 96 hours of observations were videotaped and reviewed later to identify food advertisements and specific food items being promoted. Only food items that were clearly promoted for sale during an advertisement were recorded. Each food item was then analyzed for nutritional content. Observed portion sizes were converted to the number of servings.

The article indicates that the observed food items fail to comply with Food Guide Pyramid recommendations in every food group except grains. The average observed food item contained excessive servings of sugars, fat, and meat and inadequate servings of dairy, fruit and vegetables. The situation was similar for essential nutrients, with the observed foods oversupplying eight nutrients: protein, selenium, sodium, niacin, total fat, saturated fat, thiamin and cholesterol. These same foods undersupplied 12 nutrients: iron, phosphorus, vitamin A, carbohydrates, calcium, vitamin E, magnesium, copper, potassium, pantothenic acid, fiber, and vitamin D.

The authors advocate nutritional warnings for imbalanced foods similar to those mandated on direct-to-consumer drug advertisements. They recommend investigating health promotion strategies that target consumers, the food industry, public media, and regulation focusing on a three-pronged approach.

"First, the public should be informed about the nature and extent of the bias in televised food advertisements. Educational efforts should identify the specific nutrients that tend to be oversupplied and undersupplied in advertised foods and should specify the single food items that surpass an entire day's worth of sugar and fat servings. Second, educational efforts

should also provide consumers with skills for distinguishing balanced food selections from imbalanced food selections. For example, interactive websites could be developed that test a participant's ability to identify imbalanced food selections from a list of options. This type of game-based approach would likely appeal to youth and adults. Third, the public should be directed to established nutritional guidelines and other credible resources for making healthful [food choices](#)."

More information: The article is "Nutritional Imbalance Endorsed by Televised Food Advertisements" by Michael Mink, PhD, Alexandra Evans, PhD, Charity G. Moore, PhD, Kristine S. Calderon, PhD, CHES, and Shannon Cosgrove, MPH, CHES. It appears in the Journal of the American Dietetic Association, Volume 110, Issue 6 (June 2010)

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