

# Study: Kids now see fewer television ads for sweets and beverages, but more for fast food

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Children saw fewer television advertisements for certain foods, including those for sweets and beverages, in 2007 compared with 2003, according to a report posted online today that will appear in the September print issue of *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*. However, children now see more fast-food ads, and racial gaps in exposure to all food advertising have increased.

An Institute of Medicine (IOM) report concluded that there was strong evidence that television advertising influences the short-term eating habits of [children](#) age 2 to 11, and moderate evidence that advertising influences their usual dietary intake, according to background information in the article. In 2006, 10 major U.S. food companies pledged to devote at least half of their child-targeted advertising to healthier products or encouraging good nutrition and healthy lifestyles, an effort called the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative. By 2009, 16 companies had signed on. "Given that each company defined their own better-for-you products and also had different definitions of what constituted children's programming, key questions remain," the authors write.

To assess trends in [food advertising](#) before and after the initiative, Lisa M. Powell, Ph.D., and colleagues at the University of Illinois at Chicago studied television ratings data from Nielsen Media Research for the calendar years 2003, 2005 and 2007.

Between 2003 and 2007, daily average exposure to televised food ads

decreased by 13.7 percent among children age 2 to 5 and 3.7 percent among children age 6 to 11, but increased by 3.7 percent among teens age 12 to 17. Ads for [sweets](#) became less frequent, with a 41 percent decrease in exposure for 2- to 5-year-olds, 29.3 percent for 6- to 11-year-olds and 12.1 percent for 12- to 17-year-olds. Beverage ads also decreased in frequency, by about 27 percent to 30 percent across age groups, with substantial decreases in exposure to ads for previously heavily advertised sugar-sweetened [beverages](#).

However, exposure to fast-food ads increased between 2003 and 2007, with a 4.7 percent increase in viewings among children age 2 to 5, 12.2 percent among children 6 to 11 and 20.4 percent among teens age 12 to 17. The high prevalence of these ads suggests the importance of branding, the authors note. "Indeed, children have been found to recognize brand logos at very young ages and a recent study found that preschoolers exhibited significantly higher preferences for food and beverage items in branded vs. plain packaging," they write.

The racial gap in advertising also increased in this time period. By 2007, African American children saw 1.4 to 1.6 times as many food ads per day than white children, depending on their age. "In particular, African American children and teens had more than double the rate of increase in exposure to fast food ads compared with their white counterparts," the authors write.

"A number of positive changes have occurred in children's exposure to food [advertising](#)," they conclude. "Continued monitoring of children's television food ad exposure along with nutritional assessments of advertised products will improve understanding of the extent to which self-regulation can translate into a reduction in the promotion of unhealthy [food](#) products."

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