

Boys prefer foods endorsed by sports celebs, study finds

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Food products spruiking their nutritional content or featuring images of male sports stars were more attractive to children, the study found. Credit: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/jonassmith>

Boys are more likely to choose unhealthy foods with on-pack endorsements by sports stars than those without, a new [study](#) of primary school-aged children has found.

The Cancer Council Victoria's Centre for Behavioural Research in

Cancer surveyed 1302 Victorian children in grades five and six and concluded that sports stars should be prevented from promoting energy-dense, low-nutrient foods.

The researchers also found that children of both sexes were more likely to want foods with packaging that displayed claims about the [food's nutritional content](#), such as "reduced fat" or "source of calcium."

The children were asked to look at mocked-up food packets for products in five categories: sweetened breakfast cereal, cheese dip snacks, ice cream bars, frozen chicken nuggets and flavoured milk drinks.

"For each food product category, a comparison pack was prepared, matched on packaging style to control for visual appeal of factors other than the promotion condition, but with a healthier [nutritional profile](#)," the study said.

"Overall, results show that on-pack nutrient content claims made pre-adolescents more likely to choose energy-dense, nutrient-poor products and increased perceptions of their nutrient content. Sports [celebrity endorsements](#) made boys more likely to choose energy-dense, nutrient poor products."

The study was published in the journal [Pediatric Obesity](#).

Dr Helen Dixon, lead author of the study and senior research fellow at the Centre for Behavioural Research in Cancer, said the researchers only used images of male sports stars in their study because images of male sports stars are more common than female [sports stars](#) in food packaging.

Policy change

Dr Dixon said, "Stricter measures need to be introduced to limit food manufacturers' use of nutrient content claims and sports celebrity endorsements to promote [unhealthy foods](#), to ensure consumers aren't confused about the healthiness such products."

"We already have rules about the sorts of products that can carry health claims. You could make a rule that certain foods are ineligible to carry a [nutrient content](#) claim or a sports person's image," she said, adding that sports celebrities should think more carefully about the foods they promote.

"A lot of sports people who personally have an interest in health and fitness need to think about the effect they are having on children's diets when they endorse food products. We have one in four kids overweight or obese in Australia, and when unhealthy food products are marketed heavily toward kids it can influence their food choices."

Role model responsibility

Sandra Jones, Director of the Centre for Health Initiatives at University of Wollongong, said she was not surprised by the study's findings.

"The boys really identify with sport players, and they really internalise it. And there's a sense that that food actually contributed to those outcomes," she said.

"There's also the perception that if they consume it, it must be good for you. It's about needing more of it in order to keep playing, or celebrating their success."

Professor Jones also called on high profile role-models to take more responsibility for the products with which they are associated.

"What we should be saying is: you're a role model for kids and you know you are. Is it really wise for you to promote this? Is it really a good idea to stick your name and your face on this product?"

Timothy Gill, Principal Research Fellow at University of Sydney, said the study clearly shows that children are easy to influence in terms of their product choices.

"Naivety around the market is something that, despite the fact that there are codes in place, is still widely utilised by the industry to encourage consumption of high profit margin products," he said.

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