

Foods advertised on popular children's websites do not meet nutrition standards

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(Medical Xpress)—Despite food company pledges to advertise only healthier foods to children, a Yale Rudd Center study finds that companies place billions of ads for unhealthy foods and beverages on children's websites. The study is the first to evaluate banner and other display advertising on websites that are popular with children, such as Nick.com and CartoonNetwork.com. The study is published online in *Pediatric Obesity* and was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Rudd Center researchers used syndicated Internet usage data from comScore to identify popular children's websites and the food advertisements viewed on those web sites from July 2009 through June 2010. Advertisements were classified according to food category and companies' participation in the food industry's self-regulatory program, the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI). Researchers also evaluated the [nutritional quality](#) of advertised products. Under the CFBAI, most large food companies have pledged to promote only healthier dietary choices in child-directed advertising, including display advertising on websites with a high proportion of child visitors.

Researchers found that 3.4 billion display advertisements for food and beverages were viewed on popular children's websites annually. More than one-half of these ads appeared on just two Viacom sites: Nick.com and NeoPets.com. Children who visited NeoPets.com viewed on average 30 [food ads](#) per month. CFBAI companies placed 89% of the [food advertisements](#) on children's websites.

Three-quarters of the advertisements promoted brands that food companies participating in CFBAI identified as healthier dietary choices for child-directed advertising, yet the products in 84% of those ads had high levels of fat, sugar, and/or sodium. Almost two-thirds of food ads were for sugary breakfast cereals and fast food. Of note, advertised foods that were designated by CFBAI companies as healthier [dietary choices](#) appropriate for child-directed advertising were less likely to meet nutrition standards proposed by the government than other foods advertised to children.

To address limitations of the CFBAI, the U.S. Congress commissioned an Interagency Working Group on Food Marketed to Children (IWG) with representatives from four government agencies to develop more effective guidelines for responsible food marketing to children. The authors assert that stronger nutrition standards are required for foods

marketed to children, such as those proposed by the IWG, to meaningfully improve the nutritional quality of [food](#) and beverage advertising on children's web sites.

"As previous studies of television advertising to children have shown, our findings demonstrate that CFBAI self-regulatory pledges do not protect children from advertising of nutritionally poor foods on children's web sites," said Jennifer Harris, the Rudd Center director of marketing initiatives. "Parents may believe that child-friendly sites like Nick.com or CartoonNetwork.com are safe and fun, but one-third or more of all the advertising that children see on those sites are for foods with high levels of sugar, fat, or sodium."

Provided by Yale University

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