

Junk food makers target kids with free online games, study says

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Experts call for regulation of 'advergames' while industry says it polices itself.

(HealthDay)—Free online games promoting food products tend to emphasize high-fat or sugary products, according to researchers who looked at 143 websites marketing foods to children through the interactive games, known as "advergames."

Featured foods tended to be low in multiple nutrients or vitamins and high in calories, sugar and fat, said study researcher Lorraine Weatherspoon, an associate professor of [food](#) science and human nutrition and director of the didactic program in dietetics at Michigan State University, in East Lansing.

Children often see the game promoted on the food packaging, then go to the Web to play. The games vary, but one cereal maker, for instance, has

the product character featured in an interactive comic book online. A beverage maker has a game in which users "swap the sweets"—pictures of candy, cupcakes and other treats—to make sets of three or more.

When Weatherspoon's team looked more closely, she said, "We found a large proportion of foods that were unhealthy that were being marketed to [children](#) by these advergames. Not as many [companies] promoted foods that have multiple nutrients, things like fruits and vegetables."

For instance, about 95 percent of advertised meals and 78 percent of snacks did not meet government guidelines for total fat, the researchers found. Meanwhile, only 3 percent of food met all criteria for added sugar.

The sites advertised 254 meals, 101 snacks and 84 beverages, according to the study published in the journal *Preventing Chronic Disease*.

The games have been online for a few years, but seem to be growing in popularity, experts say. Public health officials are concerned about the marketing of high-fat, high-sugar fare, as they are trying to reduce the rates of childhood obesity. Obesity affects 17 percent of U.S. children and teens, triple the rate of a generation ago, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"We really need to have a lot more regulation, or some kind of control over what is [allowed]," Weatherspoon said.

Her team evaluated the featured foods based on criteria from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, the Institute of Medicine and the Center for Science in the Public Interest. They looked at serving sizes, calories and nutrients.

The advergence phenomenon is growing quickly, said Dr. Dimitri

Christakis, a long-time researcher on the effects of media time on children's health. "It's been growing in large part because it's effective." He reviewed the findings but was not part of the new study.

"The most concerning thing about this, frankly, and the reason I think this study is important is, there is no question that the link between media use and obesity is mediated by unhealthy food selections," said Christakis, a distinguished professor and director of the Center for Child Health, Behavior and Development at the University of Washington, in Seattle.

"The more TV children watch, the less healthy their diet," he said. "They choose to eat things that are advertised."

The food industry is taking steps on a voluntary basis to market responsibly, said Beth Johnson, a dietitian and a spokesperson for the Snack Food Association. While the association does not have a guideline about advergames, it follows the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI) through the Better Business Bureau, so the guidelines will be standardized, she said.

"In regards to advergames," Johnson said, "through CFBAI, participants commit that in any interactive game provided free or at nominal charge (in whatever format, online, disk or cartridge) primarily directed to children under 12 where the company's food or beverage products are incorporated into the game, the interactive [game](#) will incorporate or be accompanied by healthy dietary choices or better-for-you products."

While Christakis agreed with Weatherspoon that more regulation is needed, he said he doubts it will happen. Meanwhile, he tells parents to "be mindful of the effects of these games." Parents need to focus more on the quality of media, not just on the quantity, he said. "These games are not particularly high quality in terms of educational value," he said.

It's not realistic to think children won't find the games, Weatherspoon said. Instead, she advised parents to supervise their children's use of the games and to consider reaching out to the companies. "Insist that the companies also use this opportunity to promote healthy options," she suggested.

More information: To learn more about the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative, see the [Better Business Bureau](#).

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