

Study prompts call for ban on manipulative junk food advertising to children

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(Medical Xpress)—A ban on manipulative junk food advertising to children is urgently needed to help fight increasing rates of childhood obesity, say University of Otago Wellington researchers.

Free toys, gifts, discounts and competitions, promotional characters and celebrities, and appeals to taste and fun, are just some of the techniques used by marketers to promote [junk food](#) to kids, according to a recent systematic literature review.

Lead researcher Dr Gabrielle Jenkin says most [children](#) and parents will be familiar with the offer of free toys at McDonalds, slogans such as "open happiness" with Coke, and the use of licensed characters such as Spiderman or Spongebob Squarepants to promote junk food to children.

Persuasive food marketing is manipulative, especially for children, Dr Jenkin says.

"Such marketing has been proven to increase children's requests for the advertised foods, their food preferences and ultimately their diets. For example, free toys, discounts and competitions promote brand loyalty and repeat purchases," she says.

She and her University of Otago Wellington colleagues are calling for an outright ban on junk food advertising to children under 16, as has been done in Norway.

In the absence of a ban, new rules would need to be added to the advertising codes around the use of persuasive techniques, as has been done in the UK, Australian and Ireland, they say.

Dr Jenkin says the ubiquitous marketing of energy-dense, nutrient-poor food and beverages has come under increasing public health scrutiny by international health organisations who have called on governments to monitor and address the problem.

The World Health Organization recommends the reduction of "both the exposure of children to, and the power of, marketing of foods", she says. In a synthesis of peer-reviewed scientific research on persuasive marketing techniques used to promote food to children on television, the researchers found premium offers, the use of promotional characters, nutritional and health claims, and the themes of "taste" and "fun" were commonly used to promote unhealthy food to children. The study is the first of its kind to focus on common techniques used to promote [food](#) to children on television.

"Addressing this issue would make a meaningful contribution to curbing the international obesity epidemic besieging children throughout the world," says Dr Jenkin.

The research has been published in the latest edition of the international journal *Obesity Reviews*.

Provided by University of Otago

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