

Health claims on packaging for many foods marketed to UK kids are 'confusing'

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The health claims made on the product packaging for a large proportion of foods marketed to children in the UK are 'confusing', and could be contributing to rising rates of childhood obesity, suggests research published online in the *Archives of Disease in Childhood*.

Stricter regulations are needed for food labelling and product content to lessen this risk, urge the researchers

Child-focused marketing techniques, using cartoon characters, toys, games and promotions (cards and vouchers), have long been an advertising staple. But the use of health and nutrition claims for particular foodstuffs is a more recent trend, note the researchers.

And the evidence suggests that when such claims are made, they create a positive impression, a phenomenon known as the 'health halo effect'.

While steps have been taken to control the advertising to children of products high in fat and sugar, such as sweets, chocolates and sugar sweetened drinks, rather less attention has been paid to other foods carrying product packaging claims suggesting that they contribute to [good health](#)/nutrition, say the researchers.

To try and address this, they scrutinised the energy, fat, sugar, and salt content of foods marketed to children above the age of 1, and widely available in various large food retail outlets in the UK.

The researchers focused on products with child-focused imagery and health and nutrition claims on the product packaging, including terms such as "one of 5 a day," in reference to the UK government's push to get everyone to eat five portions of fruit/vegetables every day.

In all, 332 different products, including breakfast cereals, fruit snacks, fruit-based drinks, dairy products, such as yogurts, and ready meals were assessed, using the broadcast regulator's tool (Ofcom NPM) to identify so-called 'healthy' food .

This uses a scoring system, made up of seven elements—energy; total sugars; saturated fat; salt; fruit/vegetables/nuts; fibre; protein—from the product labelling information, to classify the nutritional quality of foods.

The calculations showed that a large proportion of the products, including those commonly perceived as 'healthy' (41%), were classified as 'less healthy,' by the tool scoring system.

Cereal bars had the highest energy and saturated fat content, while cereals had the highest salt content.

Fruit snacks had the highest sugar content, averaging 48 g/100 g, but still made the 5-a day claim, in many cases—something which is likely to be confusing for parents, suggest the researchers.

One in three products contained concentrated fruit juice as an added ingredient while one in four used pureed fruit.

Nearly a quarter of the products, most of which were fruit based drinks and snacks, made 'no added sugars' claims. But half had concentrated juice or fruit puree as the added ingredients.

"Processed fruits are perceived by the public as a healthy natural

alternative to added sugars, but because of the breakdown of the cellular structure they potentially have the same [negative effect](#) on weight gain as other forms of sugar, which is why they have recently been classified as free sugars in the UK," write the researchers.

Many products (over 41%) made 5-a day claims, most of which were fruit drinks, ready meals, and fruit snacks. Processed fruit, concentrated fruit juice, or puree appeared as ingredients in nearly half (just over 44%) of these products.

But despite most (82%) of them claiming to contain one portion of fruit or vegetables, three out of four didn't contain the recommended 80 g portion size. And half of the products making 5-a day claims didn't specify whether these were adult or child size portions.

The serving size for most (nearly 95%) fruit-based drinks exceeded the recommended 150 ml limit for [fruit juice](#), yet the [fruit](#) and vegetable portions for most products were below the recommended portion size.

The researchers caution that while they tried to include as representative a sample of products as possible, some may have been missed, and they were obliged to estimate the content of some products in the absence of adequate ingredient information on the packaging.

But the findings indicate that "health and nutrition claims used on [product packaging](#) are currently confusing," they say.

"Prepacked foods targeted to children can be consumed as part of a 'balanced and healthy' diet, yet their health and nutrition claims remain questionable. Given the current rising rates of childhood obesity, the consumption of less healthy foods may have long term negative implications on child health." write the researchers.

"Stricter regulations on product composition, [food](#) labelling, and marketing techniques are required to discourage the promotion of foods which might be considered obesogenic," they conclude.

More information: Ada L García et al, Misrepresentation of health and nutrition claims in food marketing to children could adversely affect food choice and increase risk of obesity, *Archives of Disease in Childhood* (2018). [DOI: 10.1136/archdischild-2018-315870](https://doi.org/10.1136/archdischild-2018-315870)

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