

Ban all unhealthy food advertisements to tackle childhood obesity, urge researchers

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Today, the UK Government announced plans to ban unhealthy food advertisements on TV before 9pm and all paid-for online advertisements. This proposal is supported by recent evidence [presented](#)

[to the Government by the Warwick Obesity Network](#), an [interdisciplinary team of academics and clinicians at the University of Warwick](#), which found that exposure to unhealthy food and drink advertisements contributes towards childhood obesity by promoting the short-term desire to consume energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods. However, this does not address other forms of advertising such as billboards, supermarket campaigns, appealing characters on product packages and advergames.

"I remain very concerned about [children's](#) exposure to unhealthy food advertisements," said Dr. Petra Hanson, a clinical researcher at Warwick Medical School, and a co-author of the review. "Though the UK was the first country to restrict the [advertising](#) of unhealthy food products around children's TV programs, children have continued to be exposed to unhealthy adverts during other programs. Young adults will continue to be exposed to unhealthy food advertisements after 9pm—and we know that eating habits developed in early life often persist into adulthood."

Rates of [childhood obesity](#) have increased across over the UK over recent decades. In 2017, 20.1% of year six children (10—11-year-olds) were classified as obese compared with 18.3% in 2007. Rates of childhood [obesity](#) are highest in the most-deprived parts of the UK. The Health Survey for England 2019 estimated that 28% of adults in England are obese, and a further 36.2% are overweight.

"Parents and children are being nudged, tricked and cheated into consuming 'foods' that are high in sugar, fat and salt by an industry that does not have their best interests in mind and that commands vastly greater power and resources than they do. Protecting them against these pressures of their environment is simply common sense to protect the lives, health, productivity and wellbeing of future generations." added Dr. Thijs van Rens, Associate Professor of Economics.

[A recent review of the literature on the issue](#) of food advertising and obesity for a related [Government consultation](#) led the Warwick Obesity Network to conclude that the evidence strongly supports the Government imposing a complete ban on TV and online advertising of products that contain high levels of fat, sugar and salt.

Dr. Hanson also said that marketing toward [vulnerable children](#) is a growing trend, aided in part by new technologies and devices: "Online advertising has become increasingly prevalent, with marketers directly targeting children via 'advergates,' which encourage children to win points by placing branded food item in the mouth of popular children's characters. These games are notoriously difficult for the government to regulate as it is not always possible to prove they are a paid for advertisements."

Dr. Paul Coleman, a public health registrar at Warwick Medical School and a co-author of the review, highlighted that the children most vulnerable to this onslaught of advertising are those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. "Research has shown that children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds had greater exposure than their higher-income peers from TV and online games, making them more susceptible to the impacts of unhealthy food advertisements. These children are also more vulnerable because they are likely to live in neighborhoods with worse access to healthy food outlets, an abundance of fast-food take-aways, and a greater prevalence of outdoor food advertisements."

Dr. Coleman also said that addressing [unhealthy food](#) environments needed to be done in parallel with other measures: "The government must focus on other causes of poor diet and obesity. Tackling these issues will require measures, such as promoting physical activity, and addressing social drivers of food insecurity. It will also mean making sure that children have an adequate supply of healthy [food](#), even if they live in households that do not have the financial means to purchase such

foods."

The government's most recent poverty figures show that more than 4 million children are growing up in poverty, a rise of 500,000 over the last five years. The situation has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

More information: The review is available online:
warwick.ac.uk/research/priorities/hfss_advertising.pdf

Provided by University of Warwick

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