

Google could play a big role in protecting the health of American children

September 20 2023



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Applying Google's own nutrition advertising policy to the US market would slash the number of products from the country's top 25 food and beverage manufacturers that could be marketed to children online,

according to new research from The George Institute for Global Health.

Published today in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, the findings suggest the global company could play a significant role in improving the [health](#) of future generations by reducing their exposure to, and preference for, unhealthy foods and drinks.

Lead author Dr. Elizabeth Dunford, Research Fellow with The George Institute's Food Policy Division, and Adjunct Assistant Professor, Department of Nutrition at the University of North Carolina, said, "We know that relying on voluntary codes of practice leaves children exposed to the 'Wild West' of digital advertising, driving demand for unhealthy products that are fueling epidemics of obesity and other [chronic diseases](#) that will shorten their lives.

"Our research shows that applying Google's own policy on the digital marketing of unhealthy products in its home country could potentially reduce children's exposure to this online content, which could lead to significant health gains."

Google's Nutrient Profiling Model (NPM), which the company has already voluntarily applied in the EU and UK markets, sets out nutritional criteria that a food or beverage must meet to be advertised to children through its Google Display Network (with products high in fat, sugar and salt such as donuts and pizzas not meeting the threshold). The policy states that Google supports responsible advertising of food and beverages.

The George Institute research team used the Google NPM to profile 14,188 products from the biggest food and beverage manufacturers in the US, including Coca-Cola, Danone, Kellogg, Kraft Heinz, Nestlé and Unilever. They found that only just over 2,500 (or 18%) of products (typically vegetables, fruit, and those low in fat, sugar and salt) would

still be eligible for advertising online to US children under this policy.

While there is no publicly available information on how the Google NPM was developed, researchers found that it was broadly aligned with other validated NPMs, including that of the World Health Organization European region, but considerably less restrictive than the Pan American Health Organization model.

Dr. Dunford added, "Although it's commonly known as a search engine company, Google's main business is actually online advertising, via its Global Display Network, which targets advertising to browsers—including children—across over 35 million websites and apps.

"We know that food marketing to children is pervasive and has been linked to increased preference for unhealthy foods. Young people's exposure to [digital marketing](#) is particularly prevalent and is associated with poor diet-related health outcomes."

Packaged foods and beverages comprise more than two-thirds of the average American's daily calorie intake, and foods and drinks (particularly less healthy products such as chocolate and sugar-sweetened beverages) are advertised online more frequently than any other product. In 2017–2020, almost one-fifth of US children and adolescents aged 2–19 years were living with obesity.

Despite these escalating rates of diet-related disease, there is currently no US government-led effort to reduce children's exposure to unhealthy food marketing online, and existing food-industry led voluntary initiatives are known to be ineffective.

The World Health Organization has recently refreshed its calls for governments to introduce mandatory restrictions on the marketing of

[unhealthy foods](#) to [children](#) globally. While supporting legislative action in the US, researchers from The George Institute for Global Health suggested policies like Google's could be implemented quickly as a useful first step.

"We know they can do this, and do it rapidly—they already have in other markets. We're calling on Google to put their money where their mouth is and use their power and influence for good in the country where they started," Dr. Dunford added. "The health of future generations of Americans is at stake."

More information: Could Google Help Curb Online Advertising of Unhealthy Foods to U.S. Children?, *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* (2023). DOI: [10.1016/j.amepre.2023.08.014](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2023.08.014).
[www.ajpmonline.org/article/S07 ... \(23\)00340-9/fulltext](http://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S07... (23)00340-9/fulltext)

Provided by George Institute for Global Health

Citation: Google could play a big role in protecting the health of American children (2023, September 20) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-09-google-play-big-role-health.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.
