

Food companies' sponsorship of children's sports encourages children to buy their products, Canadian research suggests

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Research to be presented at the [European Congress on Obesity](#) (ECO 2024) held in Venice 12–15 May, has found that food companies' sponsorship of children's sports may encourage children to buy their products. The Canadian research also found that many children view food companies that sponsor or give money to children's sports as being "generous" or "cool." Many also believe these companies do so to help the teams out.

"Many children in Canada have poor diets," says lead researcher Elise Pauzé, of the Interdisciplinary School of Health Sciences, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada. "They don't eat enough fruit and vegetables and they get more than half of their calories on average from ultra-processed foods which are typically high in nutrients of public health concern like free sugars, salt and saturated fats.

"While there are a lot of factors that shape children's diet, exposure to unhealthy food marketing has been identified as a particularly influential driver of children's preferences for, and intake of, [unhealthy foods](#).

"Despite this, few studies have looked at the impact of sponsorship of children's sports. We wanted to examine the association between children's exposure to sponsorship-related food marketing and their perception of companies and their desire to purchase their products.

"Such research could help inform policies aimed at protecting children from the influence of unhealthy food marketing."

For the study, 1,020 children aged 10–17 years living in two Canadian provinces (Ontario and Quebec) completed an online survey in Feb–April 2023.

Those who reported playing on a sports team outside of school in the last year (439/1,020) were asked whether they had been exposed to (seen or directly received) five types of sponsorship-related food marketing in this setting: branded awards; branded uniforms, equipment or other items provided by their teams; signs; free food; coupons/gift certificates.

Most (71%) of the 439 children reported exposure to at least one type of food marketing when playing sports.

Around half of the 439 children who played sports in the last year reported exposure to branded uniforms/equipment (56%) and signs (54%), a third reported exposure to branded prizes (35%) and the receipt of free food (30%) and a quarter reported receiving coupons/gift certificates (26%).

The children were also asked if they agreed with a range of statements about the sponsorship of children's sports by [food companies](#) and could indicate whether they agreed, disagreed or didn't know.

Most of the children agreed that food companies sponsor or give money to children's sports teams to help them out (79%) or to encourage people to buy their products (79%).

Exposure to each of the five types of food marketing was associated with higher odds of agreeing that food companies sponsor children's sports to help them out. For example, children who reported being exposed to branded uniforms, equipment or other items provided by their team were 1.9 times more likely to agree that food companies sponsor children sports to help them out than children who did not report this exposure. However, exposure was not associated with the view that food companies sponsor children's sports to encourage purchasing.

Most children agreed that food companies who sponsor or give money to

children's sports teams are generous (72%) and cool (68%) and children who reported being exposed to branded prizes, branded uniforms/equipment and signs and the receipt of free food were more likely to agree with these statements. For example, children reporting exposure to branded uniforms, equipment and other items were 2.1 times more likely to agree that sponsoring companies are cool, while those who reported exposure to branded prizes were 2.6 times more likely to agree with this.

Some 58% of the children agreed that they would want to buy a product from a food company if they sponsored or gave money to their sports team. Those who said they were exposed to branded prizes and uniforms/equipment and received free food and coupons/gift certificates were 1.6 to 1.8 times more likely to agree with this statement.

The results were adjusted for children's age, race, sex and socio-[economic status](#) (as measured by parents' perception of how easy or difficult it is for them to make ends meet).

Pauzé says, "We found that children who viewed sponsorship-related food marketing when playing sports in the last year were more likely to view food companies who sponsor children's sports and their intentions favorably. They were also more likely to express a desire to buy products from these companies.

"This is concerning as companies who sponsor children's sports in Canada and other countries are often associated with unhealthy food (e.g. fast-food restaurants).

"Although our study cannot establish a causal relationship between exposure to sponsorship-related food marketing and children's views, it has been well-established that food marketing shapes the food preferences and intake of children. Countries developing regulations to

protect [children](#) from unhealthy food marketing should consider the inclusion of sports sponsorship in their restrictions."

Provided by European Association for the Study of Obesity

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