

Research shows drop in unhealthy food ads during kids' TV shows

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Children's exposure to food and drink ads during kids' TV shows has dropped substantially since food and beverage makers pledged to stop advertising unhealthy fare during children's TV shows. Yet, according to

research from the University of Illinois Chicago, children under 12 still see more than 1,000 food-related ads a year, most of them for unhealthy products.

For the [study](#), published in *JAMA Network Open*, researchers analyzed television ratings and advertising data from 2013 through 2022. The study authors found that a dramatic decline in food and drink advertisements during kids' shows did not fully eliminate children's exposure to ads for products high in saturated fat, trans fat, total sugars and sodium.

"Kids are still seeing about a thousand ads per year on other programs, and the majority of ads that kids see are still for unhealthy products," said Lisa Powell, distinguished professor and director of health policy and administration in the UIC School of Public Health. "This is important as the World Health Organization has recognized that reducing children's exposure to unhealthy food and beverage advertisements is a key strategy for improving both children's diets and health."

In 2006, a group of food, beverage and restaurant companies pledged to only advertise healthy products on children's television programming, defined as shows where at least 35% of viewers are under the age of 12. Later revisions in 2014 and 2020 established nutritional criteria for what qualifies as unhealthy and therefore should not be advertised to young audiences.

Using television ratings data from The Nielsen Company, UIC researchers found that following changes in companies' self-regulation, the number of general food and beverage commercials seen during children's programs fell by over 95%. However, they found that 60% of the remaining food and beverage ads were still for unhealthy products.

And overall, kids under the age of 12 still saw more than 1,000 food-

related advertisements per year, on average. Because of the steep decline in food and beverage ads during children's shows, as much as 90% of this exposure came from watching shows with lower child-audience shares.

That shift suggests that regulations against advertising [unhealthy food](#) and beverages during hours when children are likely to watch television would be more effective than focusing restrictions specifically on children's shows, the authors write.

The researchers also found a persistent racial difference in exposure to food-related advertisements. While the number of these ads seen by both Black and white children declined from 2013 to 2022, Black children saw significantly more advertisements than their white counterparts, due in part to more time spent watching television.

In general, children's time watching television has declined, indicating the need for research on their exposure to advertising on other media. Powell's group is in the early stages of launching a new project to measure the ads children encounter through social media platforms and digital entertainment.

"We know that the media kids consume is changing. They're spending more time on their mobile devices, whether it be a tablet or a phone, and they're seeing a lot of ads," Powell said. "We really need to understand where else the food companies target kids and what they're seeing."

In addition to Powell, UIC co-authors include Julien Leider, Rebecca Schermbeck and Aline Vandenbroeck, along with University of Connecticut co-author Jennifer Harris. The study was supported by grants from Bloomberg Philanthropies and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

More information: Lisa M. Powell et al, Trends in Children's Exposure to Food and Beverage Advertising on Television, *JAMA Network Open* (2024). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.29671](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.29671)

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