



## POLICY BRIEF

### SUMMARY

**Several comprehensive literature reviews have concluded that food advertising influences children's food preferences, purchase requests and consumption, and contributes to poor health outcomes such as overweight and obesity. Public health experts agree that the evidence justifies government intervention, and that urgent action is required to comprehensively restrict unhealthy food advertising to children.**

### WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE?

Systematic reviews of the evidence in Australia and internationally consistently demonstrate that unhealthy food advertising<sup>\*</sup> influences children's food preferences, requests and consumption and is a probable causal factor in weight gain and obesity.(1-6)

#### 1. Effects of food advertising on children

The three most recent comprehensive reviews of the evidence were undertaken for the World Health Organization in 2009, OfCom (Communications regulator in the United Kingdom) in 2006 and the Institute of Medicine (US) in 2005.(3, 5, 6) These reviews consistently found that food advertising influences children's food behaviours and diet and health status.

## EVIDENCE OF FOOD ADVERTISING EFFECTS ON CHILDREN

The findings of these reviews are compared in **Appendix 1** to this document and are summarised below.

#### World Health Organization (2009)

The most recent of the reviews was undertaken in 2009 on behalf of the World Health Organization.(1, 3)

The authors comprehensively and systematically reviewed the international evidence on the global extent of food advertising to children, and its effects on children.

The review concluded that children are exposed to extensive food advertising, particularly on television, and that it is having an effect on children. In particular:

- There is modest but consistent evidence that food advertising influences food preferences and consumption.
- There is strong evidence that food advertising influences children's food purchasing and purchase requests.
- There is evidence of small but significant associations between television viewing, diet quality, obesity and blood cholesterol levels.

The review also confirmed that food advertising affects both total category sales and brand switching. This refutes the common claim of the food and advertising industries that advertising changes brand preferences within product categories (i.e. persuades consumers to buy one brand rather than another) but does not increase overall consumption within a product category.

<sup>\*</sup> 'Food advertising' is used in this paper to refer to all types of advertising, promotion and marketing of food and beverages, unless the context indicates a specific meaning.

The authors noted that the review ‘almost certainly underestimates’ the impact of food advertising, as the evidence base focuses on television advertising, and gives less attention to advertising through other media, or to the full marketing mix (which includes merchandising, packaging, product development and pricing strategies).

Subsequent non-systematic reviews examining advertising and marketing practice in developed countries demonstrate that little has changed, with unconstrained food marketing continuing to promote low nutrition foods and influence children’s food behaviors and diet related health. (1)

### OfCom (2006)

In 2006, a comprehensive review was undertaken to inform Ofcom’s consultation on television advertising of food and beverage products to children.(5)

The conclusions of the review included the following:

- There is a growing consensus that advertising works in its influence on children’s food preferences, diet and health. Given that most advertising to children is for products high in salt, sugar and fat, this influence is harmful to children’s health.
- The experimental evidence suggests that television advertising has a modest direct effect on children’s (aged 2-11) food preferences.
- Estimates of the effects of advertising/television on children’s food choices vary, but some suggest that such exposure accounts for some 2% of the variation in food choice/obesity. Cumulatively, this may make an appreciable difference to the number of children who are obese, and this effect may be larger than the measurable effect of exercise and other factors.

*‘Nearly all research published in the past few years supports the hypothesis that food promotion, especially television advertising, contributes to the unhealthy food preferences, poor diet and consequently, growing obesity among children in Western societies’.(5)*

### Institute of Medicine (2005)

In 2005, the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies (IOM) conducted a systematic review of the evidence on the influence of food marketing on the diets and health of children and youth in the United States, at the request of the United States Center for Disease Control and Prevention.(6)

The findings of the review included:

- There is strong evidence that food advertising to children affects their preferences, purchase behaviours, and consumption habits (for different food and beverage categories, as well as for different brands);
- Food advertising on television influences children to prefer and purchase high-calorie and low-nutrient foods and beverages; and
- There is strong evidence that exposure to television advertising is associated with adiposity in children ages 2–11 years and teens aged 12–18 years.

*‘Among many other factors, food and beverage marketing influences the preferences and purchase requests of children, influences consumption at least in the short-term, is a likely contributor to less healthful diets, and may contribute to negative diet-related health outcomes and risks among children and youth’(6)*

### Does the evidence justify intervention?

Health agencies, researchers and expert commentators (including the World Health Organization and the Institute of Medicine) have concluded that the evidence warrants action by governments, and have specifically recommended interventions to restrict marketing of unhealthy foods to children as part of multi-strategy approaches to improve children’s food choices and diets and prevent obesity.(1, 5, 6) For example:

- **World Health Organization’s Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity (ECO):** In January 2016, the ECO recommended that member states act on the World Health Assembly’s resolution (below) and called for settings where children gather and the screen-based material they watch, to be free from marketing of unhealthy food and sugar sweetened beverages. The ECO noted that there was unequivocal evidence that the marketing of unhealthy food and sugar sweetened beverages is related to childhood obesity.(7)
- **World Health Assembly:** In May 2010, the World Health Assembly adopted recommendations of the World Health Organization for member states to limit children’s exposure to unhealthy food marketing in view of the research showing the extent of food marketing to children globally, and its influence on children’s food preferences, purchase requests and consumption patterns.(8) In 2013 Australia co-sponsored a unanimously adopted resolution by the World Health Assembly to endorse the Global Action Plan (‘GAP’) for the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases (NCDs) 2013-2020. The GAP specifically involves accelerating implementation of the WHO’s recommendations, including mechanisms for monitoring children’s exposure.(9)
- **OfCom:** In 2007, Ofcom introduced restrictions on television advertising of high fat, sugar or salt foods during children’s programs on the basis of the evidence on the detrimental effects of television food advertising on children.
- **Institute of Medicine:** Based on the findings of its 2005 review, the Institute of Medicine recommended that legislation should be introduced to restrict advertising on broadcast and subscription television if voluntary efforts to shift the emphasis of advertising away from unhealthy to healthier products were unsuccessful.(6)

Members of the food and marketing industries often refer to findings of small effect sizes of food advertising on children’s food choices as support for their position that government intervention is not warranted.

However, experts caution that research findings of small effect sizes in statistical terms should not be interpreted as evidence that food advertising only has a small effect on children, and do not justify inaction on food advertising. Findings of a small effect size are likely to stem from methodological difficulties in isolating and measuring the effect of food advertising on children and do not take into account food advertising’s wider indirect effects on children’s food preferences and consumption.(5) Since a wide range of factors contribute to children’s food choices and obesity, it makes sense that the direct independent contribution of food advertising to children is fairly modest.

Experts also emphasise that a small statistical effect on the immediate behaviour of individual children is likely to translate to a much larger effect at the population level and over the period of a child’s development. For example, Livingstone (2006) notes that a 2% variance ‘may make an appreciable difference to the number of children who fall into the “obese category”’, that ‘this effect may be larger than the measurable effect of exercise and some other factors’, and that longitudinal research is beginning to show that the cumulative effects of food advertising throughout a child’s development are ‘much more sizeable’.(5)

Commentators warn against waiting for unequivocal evidence that food advertising influences children’s food consumption and contributes to obesity before taking action.

They argue that it is methodologically impossible to produce incontrovertible evidence of the effect of food advertising on children, and that current evidence warrants intervention at least on the balance of probabilities and on a precautionary basis. (10, 11)

## 2. Estimated impact of food advertising restrictions

Recent studies have estimated that restricting food advertising on television would be a highly effective and cost-effective intervention for reducing obesity in children and adolescents.



An Australian study concluded that restricting unhealthy food advertising to children on television would be one of the most effective and cost-effective population-based interventions that could be undertaken to reduce obesity in children and adolescents.(12)

A US study estimated that a ban on advertising of fast food on television would reduce the number of overweight children aged 3-11 in a fixed population by at least 18 percent, and the number of children aged 12-18 by at least 14 per cent.(13)

## **WHAT ACTION SHOULD BE TAKEN?**

A shift is needed from 'if' and 'what' food marketing influences children's health to 'how' it can be meaningfully reduced(1)

A government led and comprehensive approach to restricting unhealthy food advertising to children, through legislation, is urgently needed as part of a multi-strategic approach to curbing the problems of childhood overweight and obesity in Australia.

For more information on how unhealthy food advertising to children should be regulated in Australia, please refer to the Obesity Policy Coalition's paper 'A comprehensive approach to protecting children from unhealthy food advertising'.

## APPENDIX 1: COMPARISON OF RECENT SYSTEMATIC REVIEWS OF THE LITERATURE ON THE EFFECTS OF FOOD ADVERTISING ON CHILDREN

	REVIEW		
<b>Finding – effect of food advertising on children</b>	<b>Cairns et al. (2009) on behalf of the World Health Organization<sup>1</sup> (Updating Hastings et al (2006)<sup>7</sup>) (Systematic review)</b>	<b>Livingstone on behalf of OfCom (UK) (2006)<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>McGinnis et al on behalf of the Institute of Medicine (UK) (2005)<sup>3</sup></b>
Influences food preferences	Modest evidence that food promotion influences food preferences	Modest direct effect on children’s food preferences (also likely to have indirect effect).	Strong evidence – influences children to prefer high-calorie and low-nutrient foods and beverages.
Influences purchase requests	Strong evidence that food promotion influences children’s food purchase-related behaviour	Evidence not reviewed	Strong evidence – influences children to request high-calorie and low-nutrient foods and beverages
Influences consumption	Modest evidence that food promotion influences consumption	Modest direct effect on children’s food choices/eating habits (also likely to have indirect effect).	Strong evidence that food promotion influences children’s short-term consumption
Influences diet and health status	Significant correlation between television viewing and diet quality, obesity and blood cholesterol levels.  Modest but consistent evidence of a causal link between food promotion and food behaviour and health outcomes.	Modest but consistent association between overall television exposure and weight/obesity. This applies among children and teenagers	Moderate evidence that food promotion influences the ‘usual dietary intake’ of children aged 2–5 years, with weaker evidence for 6–11 year olds.  Strong evidence that exposure to television advertising is associated with adiposity in children ages 2–11 years and teens aged 12–18 years.  Food promotion is a ‘likely contributor’ to less healthful diets.



## About the Obesity Policy Coalition

The Obesity Policy Coalition (OPC) is a coalition between the Cancer Council Victoria, Diabetes Victoria, VicHealth and the WHO Collaborating Centre on Obesity Prevention at Deakin University. The OPC is concerned about rates of overweight and obesity in Australia, particularly in children.

## Contact us

Obesity Policy Coalition  
615 St Kilda Road, VIC, 3004  
Phone (03) 9514 6457  
Website: [www.opc.org.au](http://www.opc.org.au)  
Email: [opc@opc.org.au](mailto:opc@opc.org.au)

**For media enquiries contact Shannon Crane on  
03 9514 6406 or  
[Shannon.Crane@cancervic.org.au](mailto:Shannon.Crane@cancervic.org.au)**

**Updated June 2016**

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