



NEWS RELEASE

Health groups want stronger controls on advertising junk food

The advertising industry may be bitterly opposed to any restrictions on their activities, but children's health is a higher priority, says a report from the International Association for the Study of Obesity (IASO) published today (Tuesday), which calls for tougher controls to protect children from commercial inducements to eat unhealthy food.

The report describes the findings of the PolMark Project (see Notes, below), which examined how countries in the European region were regulating marketing to children, and asked leading organisations in 11 EU member states whether advertising influenced children's purchases, their diets and their health.

The researchers found that two-thirds of the 53 countries in the region now have official policies on the need to restrict the promotion of unhealthy food to children, a dramatic increase since a similar survey five years earlier. However, most countries are depending on self-regulation by industry and only a few have brought in specific statutory measures.

Interviews with over 160 leading stakeholders – including advertising and food industry bodies, public health and consumer groups, children's organisations and government departments – showed that while most now agree that some controls are needed, they strongly differ on whether the present rules go far enough. The industry believes that they have made a number of concessions and that no more is needed. Consumer groups and health groups argue that this is just an attempt to pre-empt stronger regulation, and that more is needed.

Speaking at the International Congress on Obesity in Stockholm, the coordinator of the report, Dr Tim Lobstein, IASO research director, noted that measures to tackle childhood obesity in schools and families have not proved successful, prompting an increased focus on the bigger environmental and social effects that encourage poor diets.

"We have known for a decade that the heavy marketing of energy dense foods and the promotion of fast food outlets is a likely risk factor for obesity¹, and children are a prime target," he said. "We need to take this issue seriously. The food and soft drink companies have made some concessions in order to avoid tougher rules. But tough rules are what are needed.

"This cannot be dealt with one country at a time – too much marketing creeps in through satellite TV, internet, advertising embedded in videos and games, and sponsored international events.

"Now companies are moving away from TV advertising and towards child-oriented internet sites, developing social networking and viral marketing, using product placement in films and games, direct mobile phone marketing and other means of reaching children without parents' knowledge. This undermines parents' role in the family as well as directly attacking children's health. It is time to put pressure on politicians to act and on companies to change their practices," Dr Lobstein said.

The European Commission's 2007 White Paper *Strategy on Overweight and Obesity* urged industry to take action and promised to reassess the position in 2010.² Armed with the results of the

¹ World Health Organization. *Diet, Nutrition and Chronic Disease*. Technical Report WHO Geneva. 2002

² European Commission. COM(2007) 279 final 30.5.2007. Brussels

PolMark project, IASO will be urging the Commission to press for international rules to limit children's exposure to the commercial promotion of fatty and sweet foods and beverages.

Further information:

From Tuesday 0900 GMT, the PolMark report *Final project report: Executive Report* can be found at <http://www.polmarkproject.net> along with additional technical reports.

The report is linked to an oral presentation at the International Congress on Obesity
T5:OS4.1, Room K2, 14.00 hrs CEST Tuesday 13 July

During the congress, Tim Lobstein can be contacted through the International Congress on Obesity press office at:

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Notes

The PolMark (POLicies on MARKeting of foods and beverages to children) Project consists of two programmes:

1. A review of current controls and regulations on marketing to children.
2. Interviews with over 160 key stakeholders concerned with children's health or with food and beverage production and promotion, in 11 EU member states, to assess the opportunities and barriers to the development of policies in this area.

1 Regulatory Review

This review included almost all European countries (as defined by the WHO European Region of 53 countries). It surveyed government policy statements on food marketing to children and voluntary action by the food and advertising industries.

The review found that two thirds of countries now have statements on marketing to children in their national health policies or strategies, or proposals for action, showing significant progress in the development of official positions on the issue. Whilst voluntary and self-regulation have been the policy response in many countries, statutory approaches are emerging in some. The nature and degree of restrictions differ considerably between countries and there is little evaluation of the effects.

Conclusion: If government health departments wish to reduce children's exposure to unhealthy food marketing, they need to maintain pressure for action on industry and on the more resistant parts of government. Whether the controls are statutory or self-regulatory, governments need to specify the policy objectives, define the indicators that demonstrate achievement and hold relevant stakeholders accountable for making progress.

2. Stakeholder Views

Leading representatives of the food industry, advertising agencies, media, government departments, public health bodies, consumer group, children's groups and researchers were interviewed in 11 EU member states (169 interviews). The key findings were:

- The majority (92%) of interviewees believed there was a link between advertising and child obesity, with 42% believing the link to be strong. Virtually all those stating that they did not believe that there was any link were from the food or advertising industries.

- Two-thirds of interviewees believed current controls on marketing to children were not strong enough, represented strongly by consumer advocates, public health advocates, child and family representatives, academics and media representatives.
- More than 80% of stakeholders thought that restrictions on advertising for certain types of programmes would be acceptable. Twenty-five percent believed rules should apply to programming broadcast before 9pm, 14% said children's programs only, 13% supported restrictions only for shows with many child viewers, and 44% supported a combination of all these restrictions..
- Most interviewees favoured protecting children up to 12 years of age and just over half supported protection up to 16 years. Stakeholders who did not support age-based restrictions on television advertisements were primarily food producers or government officials. Those who chose not to answer were primarily advertisers or food producers.
- Commercial operators in the advertising and, to a lesser extent, the food industries, generally resist the imposition of marketing controls. Stakeholders from public health, consumer and to a lesser extent child and family organisations, believe children need greater protection from persuasive marketing. Media, academic experts and government policy-makers tend to occupy a central ground, and views vary across European member states.
- Health and consumer groups are frustrated by what they perceive as a reluctance by the regulatory authorities to challenge commercial interests. These interests express the greatest resistance to increasing controls on promotional marketing, although some food and beverage companies express some acceptance that they have a responsibility to help children eat healthily.

Conclusion: Companies are in competition and will use opportunities to market their products to children using traditional and modern media; the latter allow companies to access children without parental control. The opportunities for agreeing standards for co-regulation across the food industry and across European borders need to be increased.

Stakeholder views are prone to bias depending on the stakeholder's employing organisation's economic interest and/or power to influence policies. Stakeholders from high-power organisations and those with commercial interests were more moderate in their estimation of effects of marketing on the purchase and consumption of energy dense foods and beverages compared to stakeholders from lower-power organisations and those with health and consumer-focused interests.

The power of an organisation was related to its assessment of the current controls on marketing to children: stakeholders from organisations with less power tended to perceive current regulations as being weaker than needed, while stakeholders from more powerful organisations tended to perceive current levels of regulation as adequate. By definition, less powerful organisations do not have the institutional resources to influence policy-makers, and this gives rise to a distortion in the lobbying, of which policy-makers should be aware.



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