

Press release

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Despite the promises, children still bombarded with junk food ads

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Advertising of junk food continues to undermine children's health despite the food industry's pledges that they would restrict their marketing activities, according to a systematic review of evidence published today in the scientific journal *Obesity Reviews*.

The review examines children's exposure to advertisements for food and beverages high in sugar and fat, and found that independent surveys in Europe, Asia, Australia and North America showed little change in the last five years, despite industry's assurances that things would improve. In contrast, industry-sponsored reports showed a remarkable high level of compliance with their self-regulations, of 98% or more.

The report's senior author, Dr Tim Lobstein, said: "Five years after companies announced their voluntary pledges to limit advertising of junk food to children we find the industry has not done enough. While the companies report that self-regulation has worked just fine, the evidence collected by independent researchers and government agencies shows that children continue to be exposed to junk food advertising at high levels."

"The discrepancy is presumably due to what is being measured," he added. "The companies don't look at everything children watch, only what they themselves advertise. They don't consider adverts from companies which haven't signed up to self-regulatory pledges – i.e. several thousand smaller food and beverage companies. They don't look at the family TV programmes watched by children, only children's TV. And they use their own criteria for judging what is appropriate to advertise to children."

The UK regulatory authority Ofcom has banned junk food advertising during children's TV programmes, and this is effective, according to the review, but only during children's TV. "Advertising of junk food during family TV in the UK has actually increased since the ban on ads in children's TV came in, undermining the benefits the rules might have had," said Dr Lobstein. "Ofcom needs to widen the scope of the regulations to make them more effective."

"Self-regulation simply does not work in a highly competitive marketplace," said Dr Lobstein. "Asking the companies to restrict their own marketing is like asking a burglar to fix the locks on your front door. They will say you are protected, but you are not."

The authors call for comprehensive rules, covering digital as well as broadcast media, with independent monitoring and costly penalties for non-compliance.

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Notes

1. The report *The impact of initiatives to limit the advertising of food and beverage products to children: a systematic review* by Sarah Galbraith-Emami and Tim Lobstein, is published in the journal *Obesity Reviews* (Wiley Blackwell, Oxford, UK), and can be seen at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/obr.12060/pdf>

2. The report is part of the StanMark Project which aims to promote responsible standards for marketing food and beverages to children. Further details of the StanMark project, run by the International Association for the Studies of Obesity, is available at <http://www.iaso.org/policy/marketing-children/stanmarkproject/>

3. The criteria used by the industry for defining the media, the age of children, and the food and beverage products affected by self-regulation differ between different countries and regions, and between companies in any one location. An overview can be found at <https://www.ifballiance.org/commitment-3-responsible-marketing-advertising-children/commitment-3-continued.html-1>

and an example of a report showing 98% compliance is at <https://www.ifballiance.org/sites/default/files/AccentureMonitoringReport2012FINALDecember2012.pdf>

4. In June 2013, the European Regional Office of the World Health Organization published an update on marketing food and beverages to children, at http://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/191125/e96859.pdf

and an accompanying Press Statement at <http://www.euro.who.int/en/what-we-publish/information-for-the-media/sections/latest-press-releases/lax-marketing-regulations-contribute-to-obesity-crisis-in-children>

5. The World Health Organization's 2010 *Recommendations on marketing foods and beverages to children* can be found at www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/marketing-food-to-children/en/index.html

6. The IASO Stanmark Project maintains a listing of scientific papers on marketing to children, at http://www.iaso.org/site_media/uploads/Marketing_children_literature_Jul13.pdf

The International Association for the Study of Obesity is a not-for-profit organisation with over 30,000 professional members in over 50 national and regional associations, based in London UK. See www.iaso.org.

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