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Food Industry Making Progress to Reduce Ads to Kids, But Most Food Advertising to Children Remains Unhealthy

Hartford, Conn. – Children are viewing less food-related advertising, especially on children’s TV and the internet, since the Children’s Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI) industry self-regulatory program was launched in 2007, according to a new study by the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at the University of Connecticut. As part of the voluntary Initiative, major food and beverage companies pledged to shift the mix of foods advertised to children under 12 to encourage healthier dietary choices.

Yet children still see 10 to 11 food-related TV ads per day, promoting mostly unhealthy products including fast food, candy, sweet and salty snacks, and sugary drinks. Moreover, the majority of CFBAI companies have not responded to repeated calls from public health experts to further strengthen nutrition standards for products they identify as healthier dietary choices that can be advertised directly to children, expand the Initiative to cover children up to at least 14 years old, and expand the types of media covered by their pledges to include programming that children frequently view as well as all forms of marketing that appeal to children, such as mobile apps with branded games and YouTube videos.

“The food and beverage companies participating in the voluntary initiative should be recognized for actions they have taken to reduce advertising to children,” said Jennifer Harris, Director of Marketing Initiatives for the UConn Rudd Center, and lead author of the study.

“However, limitations in self-regulatory pledges allow companies to continue to advertise unhealthy products to children,” she said. “Furthermore, increased advertising by companies that do not participate in CFBAI has offset much of the reduction in advertising by CFBAI companies, and children continue to view thousands of TV ads per year for unhealthy food and drinks, including ads for candy, snacks, sugary drinks, and fast food that target them directly.”

The new report is being presented today at the American Public Health Association Annual Meeting in Atlanta, GA.

The study assesses CFBAI participating companies’ stated goal to promote healthier choices in child-directed advertising, which companies define as media where children under age 12 make up 35 percent or more of the audience, as well as changes in children’s

exposure to all food-related advertising, from both CFBAI participating and non-participating companies, on TV and the internet. Specifically, the researchers quantified food-related advertising to children in 2016 using syndicated market research data; measured improvements since the CFBAI began in 2007; quantified progress and the impact of limitations in industry voluntary pledges, and assessed the nutritional quality of participating CFBAI companies' child-directed products and brands as of May 2017.

Key findings include:

- Youth exposure to all food-related TV advertising—from both CFBAI participating and non-participating companies—declined from 2007 to 2016, by 4 percent for preschoolers (ages 2-5), 11 percent for children (6-11), and 14 percent for young teens (12-14).
- Less food advertising on children's TV programming by CFBAI companies, as well as reduced time spent watching TV, contributed to much of the decline in food-related TV ads viewed by children in all age groups. But the number of food-related ads per hour of TV viewing increased, reaching 4.1 and 4.9 ads per hour in 2016 for children and young teens, respectively, due to increases in the amount of food advertising on programming that is not viewed primarily by children (such as children's cartoons), but that children and young teens frequently watch.
- In contrast, food advertising viewed by children on children's TV for companies that do not participate in the CFBAI – primarily restaurants and candy companies – increased by 36 percent for preschoolers and 27 percent for children from 2007 to 2016. In addition, children's exposure to TV advertising placed by non-participating fast food restaurants (for products excluding kids' meals) on all types of TV programming increased by 95 percent for preschoolers and 61 percent for children, averaging almost two ads viewed per day.
- On the internet, the number of children visiting popular CFBAI-company websites promoting children's food brands in 2009 declined by 80 percent or more, while four of the most popular websites have been discontinued. The majority of children's food brands now sponsor popular and active social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and/or YouTube.
- Of the 319 products examined that CFBAI companies indicated met CFBAI nutrition criteria for healthier dietary choices and may be in child-directed advertising, almost 60 percent did not meet [Smart Snacks nutrition standards](#) for food and drinks that could be provided to children in schools, due primarily to excessive sugar, fat, and/or sodium content. These same brands offered 386 additional products that companies did not designate as healthier dietary choices. As a result, companies can continue to advertise brands that include primarily unhealthy products to children, as long as they show one of the healthier versions in their child-directed ads.

“Ten years after the launch of food industry self-regulation, food advertising to children remains far from the goal of supporting healthful diets,” Harris said. “The food and media industries must act to address repeated calls from parents, policymakers and children’s health advocates to strengthen industry self-regulation and take meaningful action to ensure that marketing for food and beverages does not continue to put children’s health at risk.”

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About the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity

The Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at the University of Connecticut is a multi-disciplinary research center dedicated to promoting solutions to childhood obesity, poor diet, and weight bias through research and policy. The Rudd Center is a leader in building broad-based consensus to change diet and activity patterns by conducting research and educating policy makers and the public. For more information, visit www.uconnruddcenter.org or follow us on Twitter at www.twitter.com/uconnruddcenter or on Facebook at www.facebook.com/uconnruddcenter.