

## news release

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### **Self-Regulation by Food and Beverage Industry Does Little to Reduce Kids' Exposure to Unhealthy TV Ads**

*Kids are seeing fewer TV ads for foods and beverages, but more fast-food ads; most ads still promote unhealthy products*

**Chicago, August 1, 2011** - Children are seeing fewer television advertisements from food and beverage companies, but most ads they do see promote fast-food restaurants or unhealthy products that are high in saturated fat, sugar or sodium, according to a study published today in the *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*. Further, children's exposure to TV ads for fast-food restaurants has spiked significantly.

The new study tracks changes in exposure for all food, beverage and restaurant TV ads seen by children before and after the launch of the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI) in 2006. Companies that are part of the voluntary initiative agreed to limit ads for unhealthy foods and beverages aimed at children 11 and younger. The researchers examined ads by member companies and non-participants.

From 2003 to 2009, children's overall daily average exposure to food, beverage and restaurant ads declined—by 18 percent among children ages 2 to 5 and by 7 percent among those ages 6 to 11. Yet in 2009, the vast majority of all food and beverage ads (86 percent) still featured unhealthy items, defined by the study as products high in saturated fat, sugar or sodium. And despite pledges by some industry leaders to limit ads for unhealthy items directed at younger children, this percentage was even higher among self-regulating companies—88 percent of their ads were for unhealthy products in 2009.

“Our findings show that industry self-regulation has had limited impact, particularly on the types of products companies continue to advertise,” said lead researcher Lisa M. Powell, Ph.D., of the University of Illinois at Chicago and Bridging the Gap, a national research program funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF).

“There was greater improvement in ads targeting kids ages 2 to 5, but more limited progress for ads seen by kids ages 6 to 11. And fast-food ads increased substantially—kids 11 and under are seeing more ads for fast food than any other type of food.”

The authors conclude that major changes are needed to make industry self-regulation effective. They cite lack of common nutrition standards that meet guidelines proposed by government agencies and low participation in the CFBAI, especially among fast-food restaurants, as barriers to progress. The authors call for formal government intervention to address these shortcomings if continued monitoring shows further minimal improvements.

According to Powell and her co-authors, the trends in fast-food advertising are among the most troubling. From 2003 to 2009, exposure to fast-food ads increased by 21 percent for children ages 2 to 5 and by 31 percent for those ages 6 to 11. While there were only two fast-food restaurants participating in the CFBAI, they accounted for almost half of the total fast-food ads seen by children.

“This study shows that fast food is still being heavily marketed to children, especially on TV,” Powell said. “Fast-food restaurants have not been as quick as others to participate in self-regulation efforts, and the two companies that do participate are responsible for nearly half of the fast food ads children see.”

The findings also indicate signs of progress. From 2003 to 2009, exposure to food and beverage ads on TV (excluding those for fast-food restaurants) dropped by 33 percent among children ages 2 to 5 and by 22 percent among those ages 6 to 11. And although most ads continue to promote unhealthy products, there has been a significant decline in exposure to ads for unhealthy foods and beverages—by 38 percent among children ages 2 to 5 and by 28 percent among those ages 6 to 11. The largest improvement was for exposure to ads promoting regular soda, which dropped by 68 percent among both age groups during the study period.

“This study shows that far too many children are exposed to marketing of unhealthy products,” said Risa Lavizzo-Mourey, M.D., M.B.A., RWJF president and CEO. “We all have a responsibility to safeguard the health of our children. The science is clear about the impact of marketing on children, so we need companies to strengthen and adhere to marketing guidelines to reduce kids’ exposure to fast-food ads—not only on TV, but also through the Internet, social media sites and mobile applications.”

The study assessed total annual exposure to food advertising during 2003, 2005, 2007 and 2009, drawing from television ratings data from Nielsen Media Research. Ratings data were assessed separately for children ages 2 to 5 and 6 to 11.

The ratings measure the percentage of households with televisions watching a program or advertisement over a specified time interval to determine advertisement exposure. Based on television ratings, the study examined changes in children’s total exposure to food advertising, not just exposure based on programming targeted to children.

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### **About Bridging the Gap**

Bridging the Gap is a research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation dedicated to improving the understanding of how policies and environmental factors influence diet, physical activity and obesity among youth, as well as youth tobacco use. For more information, visit [www.bridgingthegapresearch.org](http://www.bridgingthegapresearch.org).

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