



Hazardous and beneficial nutritional messages in 858 televised food advertisements during children's viewing hours

There is growing concern about the obesity epidemic in New Zealand. We recently published a study on television food advertising in this country that provided further evidence that the majority of such advertising is counter to nutritional guidelines.¹ In this letter we aim to describe additional qualitative findings that were not detailed in the former publication due to space limitations.

The detailed methods of this study are explained elsewhere.¹ In summary however, the study involved a content analysis of two free-to-air New Zealand television channels (TV2 and TV3), covering a total of 155 hours of time during children's viewing times (n=858 food advertisement screenings in 2005). The initial observer (SN) identified any health and nutrition related messages in all the advertisements and another observer (NW) also viewed the relevant advertisements and checked their classification in the database.

Results

Messages around fats—A few advertisements (shown n=8 times) provided health promoting information around the hazard of animal fats or saturated fat (e.g. “has half the saturated fat of butter”, “free of animal fat”, “low in saturated fats”). These were for butter-type spreads, chips/crisps, and soymilk. Plant oils were also sometimes promoted “cooked in canola oil” or “cooked in 100% vegetable oil”. Various products were noted to be largely fat-free (e.g. crackers/crisps/chips, soup, pasta, and popcorn) but some of these also had added sugar (e.g. muesli bars). “Low-fat milk” was also specifically advertised (shown n=3 times).

An advertisement in the “What's on your plate” (WOYP) series covered fat in food (shown n=4 times). This series is part of a New Zealand food industry initiative featuring a cartoon-style character “Willy Munchright” that has been used in other countries. This particular advertisement identified snack food products with too much fat and suggested alternative everyday snack foods (i.e. oranges, crackers, and frozen yoghurt). It also suggested cutting fat from meat. But the advertisement still said that children can sometimes have the high fat snack foods after plenty of the everyday foods. Another theme was “fat isn't bad if you just have a tad”.

Messages around carbohydrates—A WOYP series advertisement focused on “wheat” as an “everyday food” and stated that kids should eat at least six servings a day (n=3). However, the foods actually shown in this advertisement all appeared to be refined cereal products (e.g. white rice) rather than unrefined products higher in fibre. Another WOYP advertisement described sugar as an “extra” that should be eaten after everyday foods such as fruit and milk (n=3). A different WOYP advertisement also described cake as being a “sometimes food” that is sometimes allowed after everyday foods such as fruit, milk and meats (n=3).

In contrast, an advertisement for a confectionary brand showed a woman arriving home with shopping bags full of confectionary which were then eaten by the family around a table (n=18).

An advertisement for a nut spread stated that it was low “GI” (glycaemic index). However, it did not mention that the product was over 50% sugar by *weight*—and hence likely to have a high glycaemic load and total energy.

Messages around protein—A WOYP advertisement described protein foods (turkey, fish, beans, peanut butter, and eggs) and showed a plateful of food with meat, vegetables, and milk (n=4). An advertisement for a high sugar (>20% by weight) cereal also mentioned protein for muscle development. No advertisements specifically identified any protein foods that were also described as being low in fat or saturated fat.

Messages around micronutrients—Calcium was mentioned in some advertisements: “goodness of calcium”, “skim milk for calcium”, “calcium is good for bones and teeth” with the recommendation to drink two to three glasses of milk per day (the latter being a WOYP advertisement, n=3). Iron was the only other micronutrient that was specifically mentioned in the advertisements (and only in sports drinks and cereals). Advertisements around the sponsorship of “iron man” sports events may also have been to associate this idea with the iron content of the advertised cereal brand (and perhaps the impact of iron on performance).

Another type of WOYP advertisement linked vitamins to vegetables and described the benefits of vitamins (e.g. “good for cuts”) (n=3). An advertised sugared drink was described as having a “shot of vitamins” and another one claimed to have “four times the vitamins of orange juice”.

Messages around energy—The word “energy” was included within the brand name of some advertised sugary drinks and in the advertising around a breakfast cereal and a high sugar spread. There were no advertisements that described or implied that excessive energy or “high energy” or “energy dense” foods posed any risks to health or of becoming overweight.

Discussion

A small proportion of the food advertisements in this study provided health promoting information about fat content, saturated fat, animal fats, low-fat snack foods, protein sources, vitamins, and even the glycaemic index—but all relatively infrequently. Also some of these messages were in advertisements promoting foods that were still high in fat and sometimes in sugar (e.g. vitamins were often promoted in the context of sugary drinks).

Some advertisements also implied that once basic foods were consumed it was still acceptable to eat various treat foods (high in sugar or fat)—which is probably inappropriate for the considerable proportion of New Zealand children who are already overweight² or who are otherwise at risk of obesity through physical inactivity. Also the advertised image of shopping bags full of confectionary being poured onto the table in front of the family is suggestive that some companies may wish to normalise their products as part of family meals.

The “forbidden pleasure” theme for some products is also suggested in some advertisements by such words as “naughty” and “double decadence”. But perhaps the major problem with the thematic content of the observed food advertisements was that energy was always portrayed in a positive light. Similarly, there was no mention of the benefit of low-energy-density-foods that provide nutrients and satiety while minimising overall energy intake.

These qualitative observations need to be considered in the light of the various limitations of our study (as detailed elsewhere¹). However, they do add to the existing concerns around current food advertising practices and the need for further research. They also suggest the need to explore regulatory action to minimise the contribution of food industry marketing to the obesity epidemic and poor childhood nutrition.

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