A Prime Time for Action

NEW EVIDENCE ON THE LINK BETWEEN TELEVISION AND ON-DEMAND MARKETING AND OBESITY

MARCH 2018
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

HOW DOES OBESITY IN CHILDHOOD AFFECT CANCER RISK AS AN ADULT?

Obesity is the biggest preventable cause of cancer in the UK after smoking. Being overweight or obese is associated with more than 18,000 cancer cases a year in the UK (approximately 5% of all cancer cases)\(^1\). The largest number of weight-linked cases in the UK are breast, bowel and womb\(^2\). Modelling studies estimate that if current trends continue, there will be 670,000 obesity associated UK cancer cases between 2015 and 2035\(^3\). The cost of this rise in obesity to the NHS could be up to an extra £2.5 billion/year\(^3\).

Childhood obesity is a specific problem in the UK. As Public Health England’s National Childhood Measurement Programme trends analysis report recently showed, childhood obesity rates have plateaued at an alarmingly high rate\(^4\). Furthermore, an obese child is around five times more likely to become an obese adult\(^5\). There is no sole explanation for the rise in levels of obesity amongst young people. Explanations in the research literature are as diverse as genetics, increased calorie intake and lower levels of exercise\(^6-10\). However, increasing calorie intake is thought to be the most significant factor in explaining how obesity has risen to current levels in just a few decades\(^6,8,11\).

There is a growing amount of literature highlighting the link between junk food marketing and increasing BMI\(^12-18\). Ofcom regulations were introduced ten years ago to prevent junk food advertisements being shown in or around programmes specifically made for children\(^19\). This UK-wide and representative study of 11-19-year old’s diet, weight, and marketing exposure investigates whether they are fit for purpose ten years on.

This report builds on an already substantial evidence base and justifies action on junk food marketing in the UK. This is part three in a series of reports\(^20,21\) emphasising the various impacts of junk food marketing on young people, including influences of television as well as other marketing platforms on diet, alongside health inequalities.

LET’S REDUCE ADVERT EXPOSURE TO YOUNG PEOPLE

NO JUNK

TIME FOR JUNK FOOD AD RESTRICTIONS BEFORE 9PM
Five key questions have been identified on the association between junk food marketing and obesity. Our findings provide evidence that answers these questions, and clarifies whether junk food marketing restrictions are the logical next step.

1) IS HIGH RECALL OF JUNK FOOD ADS RELATED TO A PERSON’S WEIGHT?

Yes - our data found that young people are associated with a significantly increased likelihood of being obese when they can regularly recall seeing adverts on television, billboard and social media marketing. This points towards overconsumption being a consequence of high recall of seeing junk food advertising.

- The likelihood of being obese more than doubles when a person can recall seeing unhealthy food and drink adverts on television every day.
- The likelihood of being obese is twice as high when a person can recall seeing unhealthy food and drink adverts on billboards every day.
- The likelihood of being obese increases two and a half times when a person can recall seeing unhealthy food and drink adverts on social media every day.

2) DOES THE RELATIONSHIP HOLD FOR OLDER TEENAGERS, AS WELL AS YOUNGER CHILDREN?

Yes - our study incorporated 3,348 11-19-year olds across all demographics. There was a significant relationship between marketing and obesity across all ages, not just those aged 12 and younger, where the literature is more prominent. Age was not a significant predictor of obesity when analysed against all marketing platforms that were significantly associated.

- Age was not a significant factor affecting
weight outcomes, but high recall of seeing advertising was. This shows that all the ages tested are affected by marketing.

3) **DO ADS ON STREAMING SERVICES HAVE A SIMILAR RELATIONSHIP TO WEIGHT AS TV ADS?**

Yes – reported hours of streaming screen time were consistently high within this study. When combining reported commercial screen time of both television and streaming services, there is significant association with an obese BMI for a young person. This indicates that both platforms influence weight outcomes in young people and require consideration in future regulation.

- A high level of viewing of television and streaming services is associated with being almost twice as likely to be obese
- Non-commercial screen time reported in this study was not significantly associated with obesity

4) **ARE PEOPLE FROM MORE DEPRIVED COMMUNITIES MORE AFFECTED BY JUNK FOOD ADS ON TV?**

Yes – Those from the most deprived communities are associated with a high recall of seeing junk food marketing. This, combined with their already recognised greater risk of unhealthy weight outcomes\(^26\)-\(^28\), suggest that they would potentially have the most to gain from regulation designed to reduce junk food advert exposure.

- Those recalling seeing television adverts every day were found to be 40% more likely to be from the most deprived group, compared to the least deprived (most affluent) group.
- Within this study, 22% of obese respondents were from the most deprived quintile compared to 12% from the least deprived (most affluent) quintile.

5) **CAN REDUCED EXPOSURE TO JUNK FOOD ADS BENEFIT YOUNG PEOPLE’S HEALTH?**

Yes - where there was a lower recall of seeing junk food marketing, there was also a significantly lower likelihood of being obese. Therefore, tighter regulation would likely be a health benefit to young people, as there would be less exposure to junk food advertising.

- Respondents who recalled seeing junk food adverts less than once a week were 70% less likely to be obese, compared to

**WEALTH INEQUALITIES**

Young people from the more deprived group were found to be 1.4 times more likely to recall seeing junk food adverts every day.
those recalling seeing junk food adverts every day.

**CAN REDUCED EXPOSURE BENEFIT WEIGHT OUTCOMES?**

YOUNG PEOPLE WERE FOUND TO BE 70% LESS LIKELY TO BE OBESE WHEN RECALLING SEEING JUNK FOOD ADVERTS LESS THAN ONCE A WEEK.

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

This report answers key questions about junk food advert restrictions, and provides detailed evidence supporting their implementation in the UK.

We subsequently suggest three key areas of change to help address marketing and help reduce the UK’s obesity epidemic.

1) **UPDATE:**
Updating the current regulation by introducing a 9pm watershed. This will then include family shows and evening shows, where HFSS advertising is especially high, combined with a larger audience of young people.

2) **EXPAND:**
Expansion of the current regulation to increase the influence over streaming and on-demand services, as well as television. With more and more young people using these platforms, it is important to address how to reduce exposure to the adverts they see.

3) **INCLUDE:**
Inclusion within obesity policy development, of 16-17-year olds (i.e. under 18), as they too are affected by advertising.

These recommendations constitute a simple way for policy makers to achieve success in both decreasing childhood obesity and sustainably improving public health.
REFERENCES


This report should be referred to as follows: “A Prime Time for Action: New evidence on the link between television and on-demand marketing and obesity.” Fiona Thomas, Lucie Hooper, Robert Petty, Christopher Thomas, Gillian Rosenberg and Jyotsna Vohra 2018. This research was funded by the Policy Research Centre for Cancer Prevention, Cancer Research UK. For more information please contact PRCP-team@cancer.org.uk

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