

“You Are What You Eat”

Preventing the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children

A Report by Alberta’s Chief Medical Officer of Health

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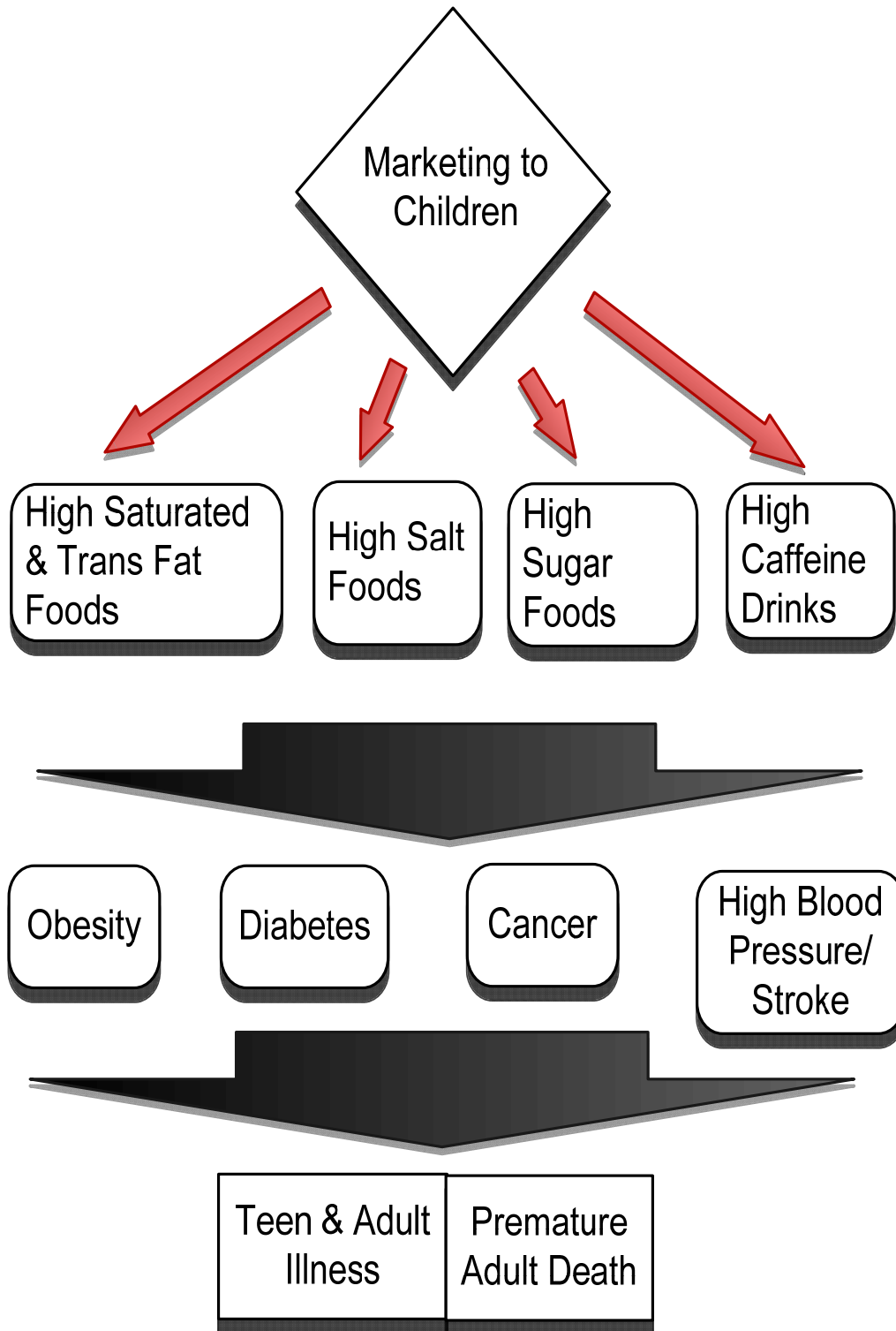


Figure 1. Unhealthy foods can't harm children if they aren't consumed.

What is the Problem?

Marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages that target Alberta children and families is harming their health.

While there is lots of discussion and controversy around whether it is foods high in saturated fat, sugar or sodium which most negatively impacting the health of Albertans, the unifying theme which links these categories together is marketing – particularly marketing directed toward children. The marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages has been linked to the rapidly increasing child obesity rates. Failure to address this will result in the sobering consequence that for the first time in a century children may not live as long as their parents.

Why do we need to act now?

Obesity has become a worldwide health issue.

Survey data show that obesity has become an epidemic, with over a quarter of all Canadian children between the ages of 2–17 years now considered obese or overweight and nearly half of all Aboriginal children being obese or overweight.

Research also shows a strong relationship between childhood obesity and adult obesity. Studies conducted in the US, Australia and Japan show that obese children have a higher propensity to become obese adults. Childhood obesity is also linked to higher rates of developing type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular problems, increased cancer rates, orthopedic concerns and puts children at risk for psychological/neurological issues including not being accepted by their peers or bullying.

Why should we care?

The more unhealthy food is marketed, the more unhealthy food is consumed.

The marketing of foods and beverages high in saturated fat, calories, sugar, sodium or caffeine is meant to generate positive feelings and beliefs about the advertised foods. Children, particularly those younger than eight years of age, tend to accept advertising as truthful, accurate, and unbiased; older children may understand that advertising is intended to sell a product, but may not be able to interpret these messages critically. Children who have been exposed to food and beverage ads have been shown to consume 45 per cent more snacks than children not exposed to the same ads.

An important factor of marketing to children is television advertising, although advertising on the internet, online gaming sites and text messages is rapidly becoming a concern. A recent survey conducted in Alberta showed that Alberta's children view an average of seven advertisements for food or beverages on television every hour; 80 per cent of these advertisements are marketing unhealthy foods and beverages. The exposure rate is far above the national average of 67 per cent and in fact is among one of the highest in the world. The marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages also has the potential to undermine healthy eating initiatives underway in Alberta schools.

How do they do it?

Marketing is directed at kids and tries to convince that a high fat, high salt, high sugar processed food or beverage is healthy if it has a minor healthy ingredient.

‘Nutrition Marketing’ emphasizes a supposed nutritional benefit when selling unhealthy foods and beverages for example, a breakfast drink that contains high amounts of sugar, dyes and is void of any natural fruit juice will be marketed as having high amounts of vitamin C.

While nutrition marketing is usually aimed at adults who purchase food for their families, manufacturers couple the messaging with cartoon characters, celebrities or athletes on the packaging aimed at children. This technique is rendered even more effective when these items are placed at eye level for younger children in the grocery aisle and at the check out. It is estimated that 33 per cent of children’s attempts to persuade their parents to purchase an advertised food item are successful. Marketing to children is additionally worrisome because it has the ability to undermine parents teaching children about healthy eating.

What can be done about this problem?

Many countries have created voluntary standards for marketing to children.

One common strategy to control marketing to children adopted by several countries around the globe including the United States, 27 countries in the EU, Australia, Canada and Mexico is a voluntary technique called “pledge programs.” The Canadian Children’s Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative is an example of such a program, whereby food and beverage companies set their own standards for marketing and nutrition to children. Denmark and New Zealand have gone a step further and developed nutrition criteria to define the foods that are appropriate to market to children.

Canada could revise advertising guidelines and monitor for compliance.

While Canada does have voluntary guidelines for advertising to children which companies can choose to adhere to, these guidelines were drafted without the consultation of dietitians or related health professionals. Even with the voluntary guidelines in place, up to 2/3 of the advertisements permitted in Canada would not be permitted in the UK, New Zealand, Brazil or Denmark. In addition, the guidelines exclude criteria for advertising on packages, the display of unhealthy foods and beverages in schools or activities such as fundraising.

Other Provincial Examples

While Québec has successfully banned advertising to children, it is important to note that the ban applies to all advertising, not only food and beverages. In addition, the standards are only applicable to French language programming.

What options are there that we could advance now?

The Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health is committing to continue working with partners to reduce marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children in Alberta by:

1. **Education:**
 - Advocate in collaboration with the Alberta Ministry of Education for the inclusion of media literacy modules in school curricula.
 - Work in partnership with Healthy U, AHS Health Promotion Coordinators and Ever Active Schools to promote healthy eating in environments where children live, learn and play by promoting the Alberta nutrition guidelines.
 - Advocate the Alberta Policy Coalition for Cancer Prevention’s recommendation to support and recognize schools that no longer promote or sell unhealthy foods and beverages and in addition no longer display advertising of unhealthy foods and beverages to their students.
 - Encourage and promote businesses, i.e., EPCOR or Superstore, who might be willing to support school programs without the expectation of advertising unhealthy food and beverage products to students.
2. **Pan-Canadian Initiatives:**
 - Contribute to F/P/T initiatives targeted at promoting healthy weights such as the revisions to the self regulatory approach to increase its effectiveness in decreasing the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children.
 - Explore the opportunity to support or partner with the Public Health Strategic Policy and Planning Branch to host the national stakeholder consultation on harmonized School Food and Beverage Guidelines”.
3. **Explore opportunities to increase awareness on the issue of marketing unhealthy foods and beverages to children through:**
 - Facilitating a break out session at the 2011 Wellness Symposium in partnership with the Public Health Strategic Policy and Planning Branch and key stakeholders to open the dialogue around current and possible initiatives to decrease the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children.
 - Promoting improvements to the current system of unhealthy food advertising by the review of best practices and community initiatives to assess their adaptability for use in Alberta.

Additional Facts

- Eighty-two per cent of Albertans would support banning the advertising of unhealthy food and beverages to children. Eighty-three per cent of children between the ages of seven and 12 have stated that T.V. is their primary source for learning about new snack items. Fast-foods, unhealthy breakfast cereals and snacks consisted of 60 per cent of the food ads viewed by children during peak viewing hours in Alberta.
- Nineteen per cent of all ads during children programming is for food or beverages.

For More Information

<http://www.abpolicycoalitionforprevention.ca/policy-focus/issue-briefs/healthy-eating-ibs.html>

Kelly, B. et al. (2010). Television Food Advertising to Children: A Global Perspective. *American Journal of Public Health*. 100 (9)