FACTS
Unhealthy and Unregulated
Food Advertising and Marketing to Children

OVERVIEW
Research shows that the aggressive marketing and advertising of high-calorie, unhealthy foods to children are contributing to today’s childhood obesity epidemic.1,2 Currently, almost one-third of children in the U.S. are obese or overweight.3 Not only are these young lives at risk, but overweight and obese children are more likely to become obese adults,4 condemned to chronic and costly diseases,5 disability,6 and premature death.5 Much of the progress we have made in the fight against cardiovascular disease and stroke could be lost if this deadly trend is not reversed.7 Food advertising leads children to spend their discretionary dollars on high-calorie, low-nutrient dense foods.8 The American Heart Association finds no justification for manipulative advertising and marketing practices to children and supports efforts to restrict these practices in the U.S.

CONSTANT EXPOSURE TO TELEVISION AND ELECTRONIC MEDIA
Children are constantly exposed to advertising and marketing through television, the internet, magazines, schools, product placements, video games, cell phones, and other means. These advertisements are designed to boost brand recognition and sales, more often for unhealthy, high-calorie foods.

- A recent summary report from the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) revealed that industry spent nearly two billion dollars in 2009 marketing and advertising foods and beverages to children. The top three sources were fast food ($800 million), sugar-sweetened beverages ($395 million), and breakfast cereals ($186 million).9 These marketing efforts are working since, on average, adolescents get 8% of their calories from carbonated beverages.10

- Young people see more than 50,000 advertisements each year on television alone.9
- In 2009, food companies spent $122 million on youth advertising via new media, a 50% increase from 2006.9 Nearly 50% of new media youth advertising for 2009 was for fast food, sugary beverages, or snack foods.9

The amount of money that the food industry currently spends on marketing and advertising to influence what children choose to eat is twice the amount spent a decade ago.9 Young children ages 12 and under are especially vulnerable to these marketing and advertising strategies because they are developmentally less able to comprehend their intent.11

REGULATION IN THE U.S.
Although many European countries tightly control or ban it, food advertising targeted at children is not regulated in the U.S.12 In 1980, Congress rescinded the FTC’s authority to regulate advertising categorized as “unfair,” and also limited its jurisdiction regarding advertising to children. While the food industry has made some strides in self-regulation through the Children’s Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI) and has recently strengthened the guidelines under CFBAI, the vast majority of foods allowed for marketing under these standards remain unhealthy.9

CHILDREN AS CONSUMERS
The food industry recognizes that children and adolescents have significant discretionary incomes and are a powerful consumer segment.

- Children and adolescents spend more than $180 billion per year and influence their parents’ spending for another $200 billion per year.13,14
- Nearly 85% of foods advertised as healthy don’t meet basic nutritional standards.15
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- The use of media characters alone on food packaging influences children’s taste assessment of a product -- licensed characters override decisions around nutritional content.  
- The majority of cereals marketed to children (66%) do not meet national nutrition standards and are especially high in calories, sugar, and sodium when compared to cereals marketed to adults.
- Research shows that exposure to food advertisements leads to greater caloric intake in children, especially obese children.
- A recent study suggests that a ban of television fast food advertising alone would reduce the number of overweight children by 18%.
- Food advertising particularly influences and harms at-risk children. Children in lower-income families who are disproportionally affected by obesity watch more television than children from higher socioeconomic families, increasing their exposure to advertising and reducing their physical activity.

THE ASSOCIATION RECOMMENDS

The American Heart Association supports policy change that addresses the following efforts to limit the marketing and advertising of low-nutrient, high-calorie foods and beverages to U.S. children.

- Only healthy foods, such as fruit, 100% fruit juice, vegetables, low-fat dairy products, and whole grain foods should be advertised and marketed to children. Implicit in this recommendation is that foods that are advertised meet criteria that the association has set for nutrients that affect cardiovascular disease risk, such as saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, fiber. These healthy foods and beverages should be the default options in children’s meals whenever possible.
- Product placement of food brands should be discouraged in multiple media technologies including movies, videogames, adver-gaming, social networking sites, cell phones, podcasts, and television programming geared toward children.
- Toy companies and the movie industry should not be able to partner with fast food companies to market unhealthy meals to children.
- Licensed characters should only be used to market healthy foods to children.
- Advertising should include positive messages promoting good nutrition and physical activity.

Advertising, marketing, and brand awareness strategies used by industry should not be allowed in schools or in educational materials.

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