

Britain's Got a Problem with Junk Food Adverts:

An analysis of adverts shown during a week of 'Britain's Got Talent' live shows (May 2019)

Summary

Britain's Got Talent is one of the most popular TV programmes with children, regularly watched by hundreds of thousands of children.¹ Previous research has shown that popular family TV shows, shown during children's peak TV viewing time of 6-9pm, have a large proportion of adverts for food and drink products high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS).^{2,3}

Research shows that exposure to unhealthy food adverts leads to children consuming excess calories.⁴ In recognition of the wealth of evidence of the impact of unhealthy food adverts on child health, the Government has announced an intention to introduce a 9pm watershed on unhealthy food and drink adverts⁵, but this is not yet in force.

The Obesity Health Alliance (OHA) analysed the adverts shown before 9pm during the six live episodes of Britain's Got Talent in May and June 2019 to identify the proportion of food and drinks advertised that were HFSS.

Key Findings

- More than one in five (23%) of all adverts shown before 9pm was for an HFSS food or drink.
- In the episode shown on Thursday 30th May and watched by 673,000 children, almost 30% of all adverts shown were HFSS. Children were exposed to over 4 minutes and 38 seconds of unhealthy food adverts during a 90 minute viewing period.
- On average, a child watching just one episode would see 3 minutes and 45 seconds of unhealthy food adverts, which could lead to them eating an average of extra 51 calories – equivalent to a biscuit⁶ or a handful of smarties.⁷ Eating just an additional 46 calories a day is all it takes to lead to excess weight in children.⁸
- A child who watched all six episodes up to 9pm would see over 22 minutes of unhealthy food and drink adverts – which could lead to them eating over 300 additional calories.
- Just 5% of all adverts analysed were for fruit or vegetables. Despite ITV's sponsorship of the flagship Veg Power initiative, not a single Veg Power advert was shown.
- Britain's Got Talent was sponsored by Marks & Spencer who showed a short food advert at the start and end of every advert break. Just under 50% of these adverts were for HFSS products.

Despite comprehensive evidence showing the harmful effect of unhealthy food and drink advertising and Government acknowledgment of the issue, unhealthy food and drink adverts continue to be shown heavily during children's favourite TV programmes. This analysis provides real-world evidence that hundreds of thousands of children are being exposed to unhealthy food advertising at a level that leads to excess calorie consumption.

We want to see the Government commit to introducing a comprehensive 9pm watershed on unhealthy food and drink adverts on TV and online with no exemptions. This would provide broad protection for children and is supported by over 70% of the public.⁹

Childhood obesity and advertising

A wealth of evidence shows that there is a clear link between food advertising and the food children choose.¹⁰ Advertising influences how much children eat,¹¹ and can lead to them ‘pestering’ parents to buy unhealthy products.^{12,13} A recent meta-analysis found that exposure to just 4.4 minutes of food advertising increases a child's food consumption by 60kcal. Children with overweight or obesity are more vulnerable to the influence of advertising, consuming an average of 45.6kcal more than children with a healthy weight when exposed to food advertising.¹⁴ Evidence shows that relatively small but consistent levels of excessive calorie consumption is the key driver of obesity.⁸

Existing regulations meant to protect children from junk food advertising were introduced for TV in 2007 and the non-broadcast environment in 2017. These regulations only restrict junk food adverts when a TV programme, film, poster site or website is made specifically for children or deemed to be ‘of particular appeal’ to children i.e. when children are disproportionately represented in the audience compared to adults, regardless of the volume of children in the audience. This has created a loophole, where programmes popular with adults and children are exempt. Paradoxically, under these rules, Britain’s Got Talent is classed by the ASA as a programme that does not have ‘particular appeal’ to children, despite it also being the most popular programme with children.¹

In June 2018 the Government announced its intention to introduce a 9pm watershed on unhealthy food and drink adverts on TV with similar measures online. A consultation on implementation options was closed in June 2019 with no further announcement to date.

Full findings

	Date of Britain’s Got Talent Live Show episode (all figures relate to 7.30-9pm)						
	27.05.19	28.05.19	29.05.19	30.05.19	31.05.19	02.06.19	All shows
No. of child viewers aged 4-15¹⁵	803,000	737,000	785,000	673,000	686,000	914,000	-
No. of adverts shown	59	52	55	55	51	45	317
No. of food and drink adverts shown	22	21	23	25	21	16	128
No. of HFSS food and drink adverts shown	14	10	12	16	11	9	72
% of food adverts that are HFSS	64	48	52	64	52	56	56
% of all adverts that are HFSS	24	19	22	29	22	20	23

HFSS advert exposure (secs)	230	170	250	278	170	250	1348
Additional kcals consumed	52	39	57	63	39	57	306

Dominance of unhealthy food and drink adverts

Adverts for food and drink dominated the advert breaks – accounting for 40% of all the adverts shown. This was in part due to a sponsorship deal with Marks & Spencer which meant a 10 second advert for a Marks & Spencer food product appeared at the beginning and end of every advertising break.

Of all the food and drink adverts shown, over half (56%) of them were for HFSS food and drinks – these are products rated ‘less healthy’ using the Government’s Nutrient Profile Model.¹⁶ This figure reflects previous research published in 2017², showing the broadcast industry has made no attempt to voluntarily limit the number of unhealthy food and drink adverts shown during programmes popular with children.

During the programme broadcast on 30th May, watched by 673,000 children, nearly three in ten of all adverts shown were for unhealthy products. This included adverts for pizza, burgers, ice cream, cake and chocolate biscuits.

Just six of the 70 adverts classed as HFSS shown across the week of episodes were for products not included in Public Health England’s sugar reduction and calorie reduction programmes or subject to the soft drinks industry levy – therefore products that do not contribute to children’s excess sugar and calorie intake.

Real-world example of children’s unhealthy advert exposure

This analysis is a snapshot content analysis of one TV programme popular with children, but it provides an important real-world example of the scale of unhealthy food adverts seen by children. Research by Kantar, commissioned by the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport estimated that children saw 2.3 minutes of HFSS advertising a week.¹⁷ This figure was based on average exposure across the population. This analysis shows that hundreds of thousands children saw double this amount, during just one TV programme.

Impact on children’s calorie consumption

A child who watched the full week of episodes would have been exposed to over 22 minutes of HFSS adverts. We used the same calculation as the Department of Health and Social Care and Department of Culture, Media and Sport used in their Impact Assessment¹⁸ to quantify the impact of exposure on

calorie intake. This uses a central estimate of one minute of HFSS advertising exposure leading to the consumption of an additional 13.64 calories.

- A child watching all six episodes until 9pm could consume an additional 306 calories.
- The episode shown on 30.05.19 showed over four minutes of HFSS advertising, which could lead to an additional calorie consumption of 63 calories.
- Evidence shows that relatively small but consistent levels of excessive calorie consumption is the key driver of obesity. Eating just 46 additional calories a day can lead to excess weight in children.⁸
- Research shows that the additional calorie consumption driven by advertising exposure is higher than children who are already above a healthy weight, so these calculations are likely to be an underestimate given that one in three children have a weight classified as overweight or obese.

This analysis provides a snapshot view of one TV programme shown across a week and cannot be used to quantify children's exposure to HFSS adverts at scale. However it provides important real world evidence to show that hundreds of thousands of children are exposed to enough HFSS adverts to influence weight gain during just one TV programme. And its findings are supported by other studies of prime-time TV advertising too.¹⁹

Advertising for good?

Of the 128 food and drink adverts analysed, just seven (5%) were for a fruit or vegetable product. This is despite ITV's support of the Veg Power campaign, which aims to increase children's vegetable consumption.²⁰

Analysis of TV advertising on the main commercial channels in March 2018 also found that only 5% of food and drink adverts shown between 6pm-9pm were for a fruit and vegetable product.²¹ So it would appear there has been no discernible improvement since there.

The Solution

Children should be protected from exposure to adverts for HFSS foods and drinks that we know can influence their preferences, choices, and intake. To do this, the Government must take action to ensure the strongest restrictions apply to all programming watched by children. The solution to this problem is to extend existing regulations to restrict HFSS advertising on TV until after the 9pm watershed.

The 9pm watershed exists to protect children from unsuitable content on TV. According to Ofcom, the watershed is highly recognisable and over three quarters of parents agree that 9pm is an appropriate time for a cut-off point for unsuitable content. Children's TV viewing peaks between 7-8pm and then begins to fall. Some children are still watching TV post 9pm, but this tends to be older children aged 10-15 years and figures fall rapidly from 10pm. Polling data shows that 72% of people support the restriction of adverts for unhealthy food on TV before the 9pm watershed.

Methodology

- The Obesity Health Alliance (OHA) recorded all adverts shown before 9pm during six episodes of Britain's Got Talent in May-June 2019. We identified each food and drink advert shown and used the Government's Nutrient Profile Model to identify adverts that are 'less healthy' and therefore classed as HFSS.
- All nutrient information was taken from the brand's website, a retailer's website, from a photo of a product's labelling (taken in store), or provided by customer service. The information source for each coding decision is labelled in appendix 1.
- Where product information was published per portion, we purchased the product (where it was available) and weighed it to calculate nutrient information per 100g.
- Where a product was not available due to it being limited edition, a similar product was coded.
- Where food delivery companies advert showed food products we visited their website to find nutrient information for a branded product similar to the one shown. Where it was not possible to find nutrient information, we rated the advert as HFSS due to research showing that the majority of takeaway meals are excessive for portion size, energy, macronutrients and salt.²² This is in line with our previous surveys.²
- If more than one food product was shown in the advert, the most dominant one was coded.
- In line with our previous surveys², adverts that were coded in the following food and drink categories were counted as miscellaneous and not profiled. They were still included in the total sum of food and drink adverts.
 - Alcohol
 - Vitamin and mineral supplements
 - Tea and coffee
 - Supermarkets – non-specified (generic supermarket adverts or not clearly for core or non-core food groups)
 - Baby and toddler milk formulae
 - Food delivery companies where no food product is shown in the advert
- Programme sponsorship slots were included in the analysis as Ofcom regulations include a ban on HFSS product sponsorship of programmes made for children or likely to be of particular appeal to them.

See appendices for a full list of adverts and calculations used in this analysis.

¹ Ofcom (2019). Children and parents media use and attitudes: annex 1

² Obesity Health Alliance (2017). A Watershed Moment: Why it's Prime Time to Protect Children from Junk Food Adverts.

³ Institute of Fiscal Studies (2018). Children's exposure to TV advertising of food and drink.

⁴ Russell SJ, Croker H, Viner RJ (2019). The effect of screen advertising on children's dietary intake: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Obes Rev*.

⁵ Department of Health and Social Care (2018). Childhood obesity: a plan for action, chapter 2

⁶ Examples taken from Sainsbury's website on 07.10.19:

<https://www.sainsburys.co.uk/shop/gb/groceries/mcvtities-ginger-nut-250g?istCompanyId=1e096408-041f-4238-994e-a7cf46bf9413&istFeedId=689af7a8-5842-4d88-be59->

1ee5688a81b5&istItemId=wxwqmilpm&istBid=t&PPC=*&gclid=EAlaIqobChMliJOahtj95AIVh6ztCh21OwfIEAQYBCABEgKmmPD_BwE&gclid=aw.ds

⁷ 1 smartie = 5.5 kcals. Information taken from Sainsbury's website on 07.10.19: <https://www.sainsburys.co.uk>

⁸ Plachta-Danielzik S, Landsberg B, Bony-Westphal A, Johannsen M, Lange D, Muller M. Energy gain and energy gap in normalweight children: longitudinal data of the KOPS. *Obesity* (Silver Spring) 2008, 16(4).

⁹ All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2078 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 12th - 13th February 2019. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

¹⁰ Public Health England (October 2015). Sugar Reduction: the evidence for action

¹¹ Boyland E, Nolan S, Kelly B (2016). Advertising as a cue to consume: a systematic review and meta-analysis of the effects of acute exposure to unhealthy food and nonalcoholic beverage advertising on intake in children and adults *Am J Clin Nutr*

¹² Hastings, G. (2006). The extent, nature and effects of food promotion to children: a review of the evidence. WHO 16.

¹³ McDermott L et al. (2006). International food advertising, pester power and its effects. *International Journal of Advertising*.

¹⁴ Russell SG, Croker H, Viner RM (2018). The effect of screen advertising on children's dietary intake: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Obesity Reviews*.

¹⁵ BARB weekly audience data downloaded from <https://www.thinkbox.tv/Research/Barb-data/Top-programmes-report> . The figure given is Total Audience: the consolidated viewing audience for the programme. This is the sum of the live, viewing-on-same-day-as-live and time-shifted audiences.

¹⁶ The Nutrient Profile Model. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-nutrient-profiling-model>

¹⁷ Kantar (2019). HFSS advertising exposure research.

¹⁸ Department of Culture Media and Sport (2019). Introducing a 2100-0530 watershed on TV advertising of HFSS (food and drink that are High in Fat, Salt and Sugar) products and similar protection for children viewing adverts online IA No: 13013.

¹⁹ Cancer Research UK analysis of March 2018 Nielsen data, published in The Grocer (18 July 2019) 'Brands urged to advertise healthier alternatives to HFSS food' <https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/health/brands-urged-to-advertise-healthier-alternatives-to-hfss-food/595715.article>

²⁰ ITV press release (2019) <https://www.itv.com/presscentre/press-releases/exciting-brave-new-campaign-get-kids-eat-veg-eat-them-defeat-them>

²¹ Cancer Research UK analysis of March 2018 Nielsen data, published in The Grocer (18 July 2019) 'Brands urged to advertise healthier alternatives to HFSS food' <https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/health/brands-urged-to-advertise-healthier-alternatives-to-hfss-food/595715.article>

²² Jaworowska A, et al. (2014) Nutritional composition of takeaway food in the UK. *Nutrition & Food Science*.