

Restricting Junk Food Marketing: Briefing paper

Obesity and overweight have become the norm in our society. Obesity is a complex issue with many causes, including genetics, but one of the biggest influences is the world we live in. The Government can play a key role in helping to shape an environment that makes it easier for everyone to be healthy.

The Obesity Health Alliance is a coalition of over 40 health organisations. **We support the Government's plan to help ensure only adverts for healthier foods and drinks are seen by children.**

Summary

- The Government has committed to introducing a 9pm watershed on adverts for food and drinks high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS), on TV and online by the end of 2022. **Error! Bookmark not defined.** The Government has recently consulted on going further online, asking for views on a full restriction of junk food marketing.¹
 - A 9pm watershed will protect children from junk food advertising, meaning only healthier food adverts will be shown at times they are most likely to be watching TV.
 - A total end to digital junk food marketing is the most effective way to protect children from junk food adverts online and will also benefit adults' health.
- The policy will only apply to sugary and high calorie foods that contribute the most to children's sugar and excess calorie intakes, including biscuits, crisps, chocolate and pizza.
- The policy is estimated to lead to health benefits worth £62 million, with social care savings of £49 million².
- This policy is a part of a package of measures announced in the 2020 Tackling Obesity strategy which outlined bold action to address the multiple drivers of obesity.

Why is the Government acting to restrict junk food marketing?

- Children's health is being affected by high levels of obesity. One in three children in England are above a healthy weight when they leave primary school.³ Children from deprived areas are more than twice as likely to have obesity than their more affluent counterparts³. Addressing obesity will support Government ambitions to level up society.
- Children with obesity are five times more likely to become adults with obesity,⁴ increasing their risk of developing a range of conditions including type 2 diabetes, cancer, heart and liver disease.
- Rising levels of obesity is stretching the NHS and society with direct costs in excess of £5.1 billion each year and indirect costs (due to lost productivity, unemployment and social welfare) estimated at £27 billion⁵.

Junk food marketing and the link to obesity

- Food companies spend millions every year on a range of different marketing techniques to help keep junk food in the spotlight - they would not do this if advertising did not work.
- A wealth of evidence shows there is a clear link between food advertising and the food children prefer⁶. Advertising influences what food children eat⁷, how much they eat and leads to them 'pestering' parents to buy unhealthy products⁸.

- Analysis published by Cancer Research UK shows that almost half (47.6%) of all food adverts shown on commercial TV channels in September 2019 were for HFSS products⁹. This rises to almost 60% during the 6pm to 9pm slot – the time slot where children’s viewing peaks.
- Research shows children are exposed to over 15 billion adverts for HFSS products online every year². This exposure is only set to surge with children increasingly spending more time online¹⁰.

The current rules do not protect children on TV or online

The rules meant to reduce children’s exposure to junk food advertising does not protect them from seeing unhealthy food and drink adverts.

- On TV, the rules only apply to 26% of children’s viewing time. HFSS adverts can be shown during ‘family viewing time’ between 6-9pm when the number of children watching TV is at its highest⁹.
- In the online environment current rules ban unhealthy food and drink advertising in online media which is of particular appeal to children or where more than 25% of the audience is under 16 years old. This is extremely hard to enforce online and creates significant loopholes. Research from the ASA found that 78 adverts for HFSS products on children’s websites and YouTube channels aimed at children in just three months¹¹.

Government plans to ensure children only see adverts for healthier food has public support

- 74% of the public polled support not showing adverts for junk food before 9pm on tv and online¹².
- 71% of MPs support restricting advertising of unhealthy food on TV before the 9pm watershed¹³.

Due to the multiple formats, complexity, and fast changing nature of junk food marketing along with the issues in regulating in the media environment, we believe that a 9pm watershed on TV and ending all junk food marketing online are the most effective ways to protect children and will also benefit adults’ health.

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¹ Department of Health and Social Care (2020). Total restriction of online advertising for products high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS). <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/total-restriction-of-online-advertising-for-products-high-in-fat-sugar-and-salt-hfss>

² Department of Health and Social Care/ Department of Culture Media and Sport (2020). Evidence Note. Accessible at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/total-restriction-of-online-advertising-for-products-high-in-fat-sugar-and-salt-hfss/evidence-note>

³ NHS Digital (2019). Health Survey for England. Accessible at: <http://healthsurvey.hscic.gov.uk/data-visualisation/data-visualisation/explore-the-trends/weight.aspx?type=child>

⁴ Simmonds M, Llewellyn A, Owen CG, Woolacott N. Predicting adult obesity from childhood obesity: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Obes Rev.* 2016 Feb;17(2):95-107.

⁵ McKinsey & Company (2014). Overcoming obesity: An initial economic analysis.

⁶ Public Health England (2015). Sugar Reduction: the evidence for action. Accessible at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sugar-reduction-from-evidence-into-action>

⁷ 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 non-alcoholic beverage advertising on intake in children and adults. *Am J Clin Nutr.* 103(2):519-33.

⁸ Hastings, G. (2006). The extent, nature and effects of food promotion to children: a review of the evidence. WHO 16.

⁹ Cancer Research UK (2020) Analysis of revenue for ITV1, Channel 4, Channel 5 and Sky One derived from HFSS TV advertising spots in September 2019. Accessible at: https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/sites/default/files/cruk_report_on_sept19_nielsen_tv_ad_analysis_-_final22july20.pdf

¹⁰ House of Lords (2020). Covid-19: Lockdown measures and children’s screen time. Accessible at: <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/covid-19-lockdown-measures-and-childrens-screen-time/>

¹¹ Advertising Standards Agency (2020). Protecting children online: building a zero-tolerance culture to age-restricted ads in children’s media. Accessible at: <https://www.asa.org.uk/news/protecting-children-online.html>

¹² Obesity Health Alliance (2020). 74% of the Public Support Government Action on Obesity in the Wake of Emerging Links with COVID-19.

¹³ Comres and Cancer Research UK (2020). Polling MPs on Obesity.