

Get in the Bin: The Impact of Ending Junk Food Adverts Online

The UK Government is considering new rules that will end online adverts for junk food as part of a plan to improve children's health. This report explains the rationale for new rules and summarises the positive impact they will have on children.

Junk food adverts and child obesity

Over the years there has been lots of research looking at the effect that food advertising has on children and teenagers. This body of research makes it very clear that **food advertising influences what children choose to eat and how much they eat**, both in the short term and the longer term.^{1,2}

Seeing just one minute of unhealthy food advertising can lead to children eating an additional 14.2 calories.³ These prompts, that can lead to eating just a little bit extra every day, can lead to excess weight in children – as it can take as little as 46 additional calories every day.⁴ **So watching just a few minutes of junk food adverts can have a big impact on children's health.** This is the reason the UK Government is planning to change the rules about what types of food can be advertised online.

The impact of the new rules

If the UK Government goes ahead with their proposals for a total restriction of junk food adverts online, it will benefit children's health significantly.

Based on Government impact assessment calculations, the new rules will remove 1,329 kcal from children's diets (per year per child).⁵ But this figure assumes the benefits will be spread equally across all children. **This won't be the case** as some children are exposed to far more advertising than others. Plus, evidence shows children who already have a weight classed as overweight or obese eat more in response to advertising,³ so will benefit more from the new rules.

Overall, the new restrictions will lead to children (aged 4-15) in the UK eating nearly **12.5 billion FEWER calories a year.**

That's equivalent to removing the following from children's diets:

- **62 million doughnuts a year**⁶
or
- **150 million chocolate biscuits a year**⁷
or
- **41 million cheeseburgers a year**⁸

By month that works out as UK children not eating:

- **5.2 million doughnuts a month**
or
- **12.5 million chocolate biscuits a month**
or
- **3.4 million cheeseburgers a month**

By week that works out as UK children not eating:

- **1.2 million doughnuts a week**
or
- **2.9 million chocolate biscuits a week**
or
- **798,000 cheeseburgers a week**

That's enough doughnuts to fill up 88 small builder's skips every week.⁹ Or enough chocolate biscuits to fill 183 wheelie bins.¹⁰

How many junk food adverts do children actually see online?

It's hard to accurately assess the number of junk food adverts children and teens see online as this information is not shared by online platforms in a transparent way, as it is for TV. An analysis commissioned by the Department of Health estimated **UK children are exposed to around 15.1 billion adverts for food and drink products high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) every year.**¹¹ This massive volume of advertising will not be equally dispersed among the under 16s – the amount of time children spend on screens varies considerably. Plus, algorithms used by social media platforms, means that users are repeatedly targeted with similar marketing content – i.e. if a young person has engaged with posts about junk food, they will keep being shown more marketing content about junk food.

Unlike TV, where adverts are typically shown before and during programmes, online advertising uses a range of different formats with marketing content specifically designed to seamlessly blend with organic online content so users may not even realise they are engaging with advertising. A growing trend is the use of online 'influencers' where popular and often highly influential social media stars are paid by food brands to endorse products to their followers.

The ubiquity of children's digital interaction means **children see online advertising everywhere they go:** when they wake up and check their social media; on digital billboards on the way to school; playing online games in their lunchbreak; researching their homework online; browsing YouTube; emailing their family; gaming on a connected device.

What is a junk food advert?

Food products can be classed as being HFSS based on how much sugar, saturated fat and salt they contain (particularly if they also contain little in the way of nutrients beneficial to our health such as fruit and vegetables, fibre and protein).

The new restrictions that the Government is proposing on advertising will apply to foods and drinks from categories that contribute to children's excess sugar and calorie intakes AND are also HFSS. This typically includes processed food like **biscuits, chocolates, sweets, crisps, burgers and pizza.**

It will not include foods that are not likely to be attractive to children such as olive oil, mustard and butter.

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What next?

The UK Government is due to announce their plans on restricting junk food adverts online in the next few weeks. Obesity Health Alliance members fully support taking junk food adverts out of the spotlight for good with a total online restriction. This will mean children will only see adverts for healthier food and drinks online – benefiting everyone’s health.

For more information:

Caroline Cerny, Alliance Lead, caroline.cerny@obesityhealthalliance.org.uk

¹ Hastings G, Stead M, McDermott L, Forsyth A, MacKintosh AM, Rayner M, Godfrey C, Caraher M, Angus K. (2003). Review of research on the effects of food promotion to children. London: Food Standards Agency. Sep 22

² Halford JC et al. (2007). Beyond-brand effect of television (TV) food advertisements/commercials, in Public Health Nutrition 11(9):897-904

³ Russell SJ, Croker H, Viner RM. The effect of screen advertising on children's dietary intake: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Obes Rev.* 2019 Apr;20(4):554-568. doi: 10.1111/obr.12812. Epub 2018 Dec 21

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

⁵ DCMS & DHSC (2020). Evidence note. <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/total-restriction-of-online-advertising-for-products-high-in-fat-sugar-and-salt-hfss/evidence-note>

3.64 kcal per day per child, or 1,329 kcal per year per child, multiplied by 9.4m (no. of children in UK population aged 4-15)

⁶ Glazed doughnut = 200 kcals (<https://www.krispykreme.co.uk/original-glazed.html>)

⁷ Chocolate digestive biscuits = 83 kcals (https://www.tesco.com/groceries/en-GB/products/300917252?sc_cmp=ppc*GHS+-+Grocery+-+Repeat+&+DS*PX_Shopping+GSC_Actives_Generic_Top+Offers*Food+Cupboard+Top+Offers_Shopping*PRO DUCT_GROUP300917252*&ds_rl=1116322&gclid=CjwKCAiAp4KCBhB6EiwAxRxbpGe2MayZDe87LuOvHCfjUith7CEzKa9b5ReOrkff8NMglf3dTZ2o6BoCcHcQAvD_BwE&gclidsrc=aw.ds)

⁸ Cheeseburger = 301 kcal (<https://www.mcdonalds.com/gb/en-gb/product/cheeseburger.html>)

⁹ Small builders skip = 305cm/122cm/122cm. Doughnut = 8cm/8cm/5cm. The calculations are based on area of the doughnut and skip.

¹⁰ Wheelie bin = /60cm/80cm/180cm. Biscuit = 7cm/7cm/1cm. The calculations are based on area of the biscuit and wheelie bin.

¹¹ DCMS, DHSC (2020). Introducing a total online advertising restriction for products high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS). Consultation document.