



# Bonus: Food marketing toward youth contributing to unhealthy choices: Industry has role in stemming obesity

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By Kim Krisberg

To help confront the nation's continuing childhood obesity problem, a new Institute of Medicine report is calling on food marketers to re-examine their role and do their part to encourage healthier habits.



Student at McLean High School in McLean, Va., walk past vending machines on school property in December 2005. A recent IoM report found that food marketing toward children is contributing to kids' poor nutrition choices. (Photo by Paul J. Richards, courtesy Getty Images)

Released in early December, "Food Marketing to Children and Youth: Threat or Opportunity?" found that food and beverage marketing aimed at children ages 12 and younger leads them to request and consume higher calorie, less nutritious products. The IoM report, which marks the most comprehensive review of scientific data on the relationship between food marketing and children's diets so far, urges food and beverage companies to shift their vast resources toward a more nutritious direction, as the unhealthy eating habits children pick up during their developing years are likely to follow them into adulthood.

The effect of food marketing is a timely issue, as childhood obesity is a "matter of national concern," according to the report. The number of U.S children and youth who are considered obese has more than tripled during the past 40 years, from about 5 percent of 6- to 19-year-olds in the 1960s to about 16 percent from 1999 to 2002. Such children are at an increased risk of developing chronic diseases, such as type II diabetes, as well other related health complications if they remain obese into adulthood.

Already, obesity-related health problems constitute billions of dollars in health care spending.

"I think we set a new standard for developing a rigorous methodology for evaluating the studies that have been done," said J. Michael McGinnis, MD, MPP, chair of IoM's Committee on Food Marketing and the Diets of Children and Youth, which authored the report. "Because of the rigor of the analysis, hopefully we've changed the terms of the debate. The question of whether or not marketing influences children's diets has essentially been put to rest."

The food and beverage industry spent about \$10 billion in 2004 to market products to children and youth, and four of the top 10 items children ages 8 to 12 say they can

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purchase without parental permission is either a food or beverage item, the authors reported. However, those items are likely to be food or beverage products high in calories, sugar, fat or salt, as such products represent most of what is marketed toward children. In addition, today's marketing strategies comes at kids from all directions, with messages reaching them in their homes, schools, shopping malls and child-care settings and through television, radio, the Internet, magazines as well as via music and cell phones. Much marketing also utilizes kid-friendly figures, such as popular cartoon characters, to push junk food on kids.

And the marketing works: According to the report, there is strong evidence that television marketing influences what food and beverages children ages 2 to 11 like and what they request their parents to buy. However, there was not enough evidence to determine how marketing affects the preferences of 12- to 18-year-olds, the report said. While the authoring committee was unable to conclusively say television advertising is a direct cause of childhood obesity, it did note a strong statistical connection between advertisement viewing and obesity.

"We were looking at the health implications for children, but also at the cognitive issues related to children...and most children 18 and younger do not understand the cognitive intent of advertising," Mary Story, PhD, RD, a member of the IoM authoring committee, told The Nation's Health. "Prevailing marketing to U.S. youth is way out of balance and does contribute to an environment that puts their health at risk."

The Center for Science in the Public Interest, a national advocate for healthier food environments, described the IoM report as a "milestone that marks the beginning of the end of junk food marketing to kids." The center released its own food marketing guidelines in January 2005 that proposed certain nutritional thresholds for foods marketed toward kids, noting that about half of the more than 50 commercial messages kids receive per day are for food.

The IoM report made a number of recommendations on how to address the issue of food marketing and children's health. While many were calls for voluntary actions on the part of industry, the committee also recommended that within two years, the U.S. health and human services secretary should report any progress to Congress and recommend additional actions that may be needed, said Story, an APHA member and past chair of the Association's Food and Nutrition Section. Other recommendations include calls for the government to help foster and promote healthy diets as well as to enact legislation if industry fails to shift the emphasis away from unhealthy foods.

While there is currently an industry-backed Children's Advertising Review Unit, which monitors advertising directed toward children, its guidelines are voluntary. In its recommendations, the IoM report called for a "formal evaluation" of the review unit's impact and enforcement.

"We're calling on the food and beverage companies, restaurants, trade associations, advertisers, media, parents...to really seize this opportunity," Story said.

Fortunately, the "conditions for change" exist, McGinnis said. He pointed to some companies' efforts to promote healthier foods, such as creating graphic icons that when placed on a food package tells a consumer the product is healthy.

McGinnis urged industries to work collaboratively with the science sector and government to develop industry-wide standards for marketing toward children. He noted that on the outset, the effort should be voluntary because "we need the creativity and resources of industry in the mix." Also, with marketing taking so many different forms,

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the “notion of trying to develop a regulatory apparatus that could effectively approach all marketing practices is mind-boggling,” he added.

“In the end, we can’t forget that the most important players in all of this are really the parents and the children,” McGinnis told The Nation’s Health. “There are clearly important educational efforts that need to be better addressed.”

For more information or a copy of the IoM food marketing report, visit [www.iom.edu](http://www.iom.edu) .

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