

Marketing of unhealthy foods to children

Childhood obesity on the rise

- Overweight and obesity are major risk factors for a number of chronic non-communicable diseases (NCDs), including Diabetes, Cardiovascular diseases and Cancer. Obesity is believed to account for 80-85% of the risk of developing type 2 diabetes, while recent research suggests that obese people are up to 80 times more likely to develop type 2 Diabetes¹.
- Obesity in childhood often follows children into adolescence and adulthood², meaning their future is more likely to include Diabetes, Heart disease, and Cancer^{3,4}.
- Data from the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2016 stated that over 340 million children and adolescents aged 5-19 were overweight or obese. In 2018, 40 million children under 5 years were recorded to be overweight or obese.⁴
- The rates of childhood obesity are rising rapidly in many countries, and the number of overweight and obese children aged under five years is predicted to increase to 70 million by 2025.⁴
- The global prevalence of overweight and obesity among children and adolescents aged 5-19 has risen dramatically from just 4% in 1975 to just over 18% in 2016 with only few countries taking action to fight this damaging health issue that has lifelong consequences on health, educational attainment and quality of life.



- **In Jamaica**, the newly released 2017 Global School-based Student Health Survey (GSHS) shows an alarming picture when compared to 2010. **Obesity rates in boys have almost doubled from 5.3% to 10.3% (94% increase). The girls are not far behind with obesity rates increasing from 6.7% to 9.9% (47% increase).**⁵

Food Marketing Leads to Poor Diet and Obesity

- The World Health Organization and other major health organizations worldwide all point to pervasive, unhealthy food marketing to children as a significant risk factor for childhood obesity.^{6,7}
- Evidence from systematic reviews on the extent, nature and effects of food marketing to children conclude that advertising is extensive and other forms of food (including non-alcoholic beverages) marketing to children are widespread across the world.⁸ Most of this marketing is for foods with a high content of fat, sugar or salt. Evidence also shows that television advertising influences children's food preferences, purchase requests and consumption patterns⁹ and that children recall, enjoy and engage with this advertising.¹⁰
- Children are unable to discern the persuasive intent of marketing, and advertising of foods and beverages of minimal nutritional value. Such promotional campaigns may raise ethical concerns and diminish children's enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health.¹¹

Examples of marketing to children

Although television remains an important medium, a wide array of marketing techniques are used including online advertising (social media, news, games and music sites); sponsorship (children's programmes and videos, community and school events, health campaigns, school meals); product placement and branding (e.g. branded books, toys, sports teams and games); sales promotion; promotions using celebrities/entertainers; brand mascots or cartoon characters popular with children; packaging, labelling and point-of-purchase displays and product promotion (e.g. packaging with links to online games/discounted videos/music); direct marketing (e-mails and text messages, sampling schemes in schools), communication through "viral marketing" and by word-of-mouth; and advergames (advertising embedded in video games).¹²

Solutions to the problem

The World Health Organization urges countries to take action to reduce the exposure of such marketing to children by implementing a set of internationally-endorsed measures to limit the negative impact of food marketing to children and adolescents with a view to reducing exposure of children to marketing messages that promote foods high in saturated fats, trans-fatty acids, free sugars, or salt, and to reduce the use of powerful techniques to market these foods to children.⁶ Other global leaders such as the Pan American Health Organization¹³, United Nations Children Fund



(UNICEF),¹⁴ European Union,¹⁵ and World Cancer Research Fund,¹² have unequivocally recommended protecting children from exposure to unhealthy food marketing as a crucial step in stopping the rise of childhood obesity — by restricting or banning marketing targeted or viewed by children, by improving the nutritional profile of promoted products, or by both means.

Current Practices in Other Countries

In response to the growing concern, countries in the Caribbean and Latin America such as Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Peru and other European states have established regulations on food marketing to children.¹⁶ For example:

- In 2010, Mexico began restriction of unhealthy food and sugar sweetened beverage advertisements for television programs to children during certain times of the day. In July 2014, the government extended the restriction to films.¹⁷
- In 2016, Chile's comprehensive Law of Food Labelling and Advertising was passed which included a restriction of marketing of foods high in calories, saturated fats, salt and sugar to children under 14 years old (including television, website, radio and magazine advertisements). These foods are also restricted from being marketed within schools. Cartoons, toys and colouring material included in these ads or as marketing aids are also restricted. The law resulted in a reduction the number of unhealthy food television advertisements seen (pre-schoolers saw 44% less and adolescents saw 58% less advertisements)¹⁸ and a 28% reduction the number of products high in salt, fat and sugar with marketing to children on the package¹⁹.
- In Sweden, The General Marketing Act includes a ban on any advertising targeted at children under 12 years on national radio and TV, before and during children's programmes. People associated with children's programmes are not allowed to take part in advertising targeted at children under the age of 12 years.²⁰ Evidence published by the FAO in 2017 showed that Sweden experienced lower obesity rates relative to countries with no ban.²¹

The Way forward for Jamaica

Jamaica has committed to halt the rise of obesity in keeping with its obligations under the Sustainable Development Goals and other national and International commitments through actions such as restriction on marketing of unhealthy foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children as referred to in the Ministry of Health's - National Strategic And Action Plan For The Prevention And Control Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) In Jamaica 2013 – 2018²³ and the National Operational Action Plan For The Prevention And Control Of Obesity In Children And Adolescents In Jamaica 2016 –2019.

In Jamaica, there are currently no restrictions on the marketing/advertising of unhealthy foods to children. However, the Children's Code for Programming, monitored by the Broadcasting Commission, mandates all licensed television, radio and cable providers to implement strategies aimed at limiting children's exposure to potentially damaging media.

An update of the Children's Code of Programming to include restrictions on marketing of unhealthy foods to children may be a crucial step towards reversing the trends of childhood obesity and securing the health of the next generations. A comprehensive approach has the highest potential to achieve the desired impact of reducing the rates of childhood obesity in Jamaica, and as recommended by the WHO, governments as key stakeholders in policy development are encouraged to set clear definitions, thereby allowing for uniform policy implementation.

¹ Diabetes and obesity. Available online at <https://www.diabetes.co.uk/diabetes-and-obesity.html>

² Singh AS, Mulder C, Twisk JW, van Mechelen W, Chinapaw MJ. Tracking of childhood overweight into adulthood: a systematic review of the literature. *Obes Rev.* 2008;9(5):474-488.

³ World Health Organization. Consideration of the evidence on childhood obesity for the Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity: report of the ad hoc working group on science and evidence for ending childhood obesity. 2016; <http://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/206549?locale-attribute=fr&>. Accessed August 23, 2018.

⁴ World Health Organization. 2020. Facts on Obesity. Available online at <https://www.who.int/news-room/facts-in-pictures/detail/6-facts-on-obesity>

⁵ National Council on Drug Abuse. 2017. Global School-based Student Health Survey

⁶ Ebbeling CB, Pawlak DB, Ludwig DS. Childhood obesity: public health crisis, common sense cure. *The Lancet.* 2002;360(9331):473-482

⁷ Cairns G, Angus K, Hastings G, Caraher M. Systematic reviews of the evidence on the nature, extent and effects of food marketing to children. A retrospective summary. *Appetite.* 2013;62:209-215.

⁸ Hastings G et al. *Review of the research on the effects of food promotion to children.* Glasgow, University of Strathclyde, Centre for Social Marketing; 2003 (<http://www.food.gov.uk/news/newsarchive/2003/sep/promote>); Hastings G et al. *The extent, nature and effects of food promotion to children: a review of the evidence.* Geneva, World Health organization, 2006 (http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2007/9789241595247_eng.pdf); McGinnis JM, Gootman JA, Kraak VI, eds. *Food marketing to children and youth: threat or opportunity?* Washington DC, Institute of Medicine, National Academies Press, 2006 (http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=11514#toc); and Cairns G, Angus K, Hastings G. *The extent, nature and effects of food promotion to children: a review of the evidence to December 2008.* Geneva, World Health Organization, 2009 (http://www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/Evidence_Update_2009.pdf).

⁹ World Health Organization. 2010. Set of recommendations on the marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children. Available online at https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/44416/9789241500210_eng.pdf;sequence=1

¹⁰ World Health Organization. 2006. The Extent, Nature and Effects of Food Promotion to Children: A Review of the Evidence.

¹¹ Pan American Health Organization. 2014. Plan of action for the prevention of obesity in children and adolescents

¹² World Health Organization Marketing of foods high in fat, salt and sugar to children: update 2012–2013

¹³ Pan American Health Organization. Recommendations from a Pan American Health Organization Expert Consultation on the Marketing of Food and Non Alcoholic Beverages to Children in the Americas [Internet]. Washington DC: PAHO; 2011 [cited 2014 Apr 2]. Available from: <http://bvs.minsa.gob.pe/local/minsa/1734.pdf>

¹⁴ UNICEF. 2019. The State of the World's Children 2019: Children, food and nutrition. Available online at <https://www.unicef.org/reports/state-of-worlds-children-2019>

¹⁵ European Union. Action Plan on Childhood Obesity 2014-2020. 2014

¹⁶ World Cancer Research Fund International. 2018. Restrict food advertising and other forms of commercial promotion. Available at <https://www.wcrf.org/sites/default/files/Restrict-advertising.pdf>

¹⁷ UNICEF. (2019). *Children, Food and Nutrition: Growing Well in a Changing World.* [PDF document]. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/media/60836/file/SOWC-2019-LAC.pdf>

¹⁸ Dillman Carpenter FR, Correa T, Reyes M, Taillie L. (2019). Evaluating the impact of Chile's marketing regulation of unhealthy foods and beverages: preschool and adolescent children's changes in exposure to food advertising on television. *Public Health Nutr.*

¹⁹ Mediano Stoltze, F., et al. (2019). Prevalence of Child-Directed Marketing on Breakfast Cereal Packages before and after Chile's Food Marketing Law: A Pre-and Post-Quantitative Content Analysis. *International journal of environmental research and public health*

²⁰ World Health Organization. (2018). *Evaluating Implementation of the WHO Set of Recommendations of the Marketing of Foods and Non-alcoholic Beverages to Children.* [PDF document]. Retrieved from http://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/384015/food-marketing-kids-eng.pdf

²¹ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. 2017. Ex-post evidence on the effectiveness of policies targeted at promoting healthier diets. Available online at: <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i8191e.pdf>

²² Available at: <https://www.moh.gov.jm/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/National-Strategic-and-Action-Plan-for-the-Prevention-and-Control-Non-Communicable-Diseases-NCDS-in-Jamaica-2013-2018.pdf>