



# Protecting Our Children's Health: Restricting Food and Beverage Marketing

## What needs to be done?

**Governments should restrict the commercial marketing of foods and beverages to protect children and support parents. These restrictions are a critical part of a comprehensive food policy and chronic disease prevention plan and will help create environments that make the healthy choice the easy choice.**

## What are we proposing?

Governments should restrict the commercial marketing of foods and beverages to children and youth, 16 years of age and under. This would include all aspects of commercial marketing; promotion, placement, price and product.<sup>1</sup>

These recommendations align with the *Ottawa Principles*, a consensus position developed by nationally-recognized health opinion leaders, health professionals and researchers from across Canada, many of whom belong to the Stop Marketing to Kids Coalition. The *Ottawa Principles* recommend restrictions on all food and beverage marketing as the best approach for effective policy. However, if the federal government decides to proceed with restrictions on unhealthy food and beverages, then a strong and robust nutrient profiling system is essential.

## Why is this an issue?

### Protecting our most vulnerable

- Children and youth are impressionable and should be protected from marketing and industry tactics that are harmful to their health. As a society, we have a duty to keep children and youth safe and give them the best start for a long, healthy life.
- Food and beverage marketing restrictions make it easier for parents, educators and health professionals working hard to promote healthy habits, especially when it comes to vulnerable populations.



- Regulations on marketing to children are a critical aspect of any comprehensive food strategy, facilitating the creation of a healthy food environment free of commercial influence from marketing to children.
- This is an issue of fairness, where the marketing machinery of billion dollar multi-national food and beverage companies has an unfair advantage over influencing the eating habits of our children and youth.
- On the one hand, we have: cartoon characters, video and online games, toy giveaways, hip celebrities, and famous athletes all pushing unhealthy food and beverages on children and youth—effectively without any limits or restrictions. On the other hand, we have: hard-working parents, teachers, nurses, doctors, dietitians and educators trying to instill within children and youth healthy eating habits. Parents and those supporting our children and youth should not have to compete against multibillion dollars corporations to shape children’s eating habits.
- Young children are vulnerable to marketing because they have not yet reached the stage of mental development where they are able to distinguish between marketing, entertainment and reality.
- Children are unable to assess the long-term health risks associated with consuming unhealthy products.
- The average child watches approximately two hours of television per day.
- Food and beverage advertising during children’s television programming is higher in Canada compared to many other countries at a rate of nearly 6 ads per hour.
- Collectively, Canadian children see 25 million food and beverage ads a year on their top 10 favourite websites. The most frequently advertised product categories on Canadian children and youth favoured websites are restaurants, cakes, cookies, ice cream, sugary drinks and cereal.
- Approximately 90% of food and beverages marketed to children on TV and online are unhealthy with high levels of salt, fat and/or sugar.
- A Canadian study showed that 83% of food and beverage companies’ websites targeted children under 12 years of age.
- Food and beverage marketing greatly influences children’s food preferences, purchase requests and choices. Marketing is associated with increased consumption of fast foods and unhealthy food and beverages containing high levels of fat, sodium and sugars.

## What is marketing?

**World Health Organization Definition: “Marketing” refers to any form of commercial communication or message that is designed to, or has the effect of, increasing the recognition, appeal and/or consumption of particular products and services. This includes anything that acts to advertise or otherwise promote a product or service.**

### Children are bombarded with marketing

- Canadian children and youth are exposed to a large amount of marketing with television remaining the primary medium and new avenues like advergaming (interactive games containing advertisements) and social media advertising are becoming more common.
- Screen time among Canadian children and youth averages almost eight hours per day in front of screens including computers, tablets, phones and television. Collectively they are exposed to a high frequency of traditional, online and social media marketing.

### Nutrition and health

- While the causes of disease are numerous, poor diet is the leading cause of obesity and nutrition has been found to be a leading cause of premature death worldwide. Good nutrition is essential for optimal growth and development in children.
- In Canada, consumption of unhealthy foods has contributed to an increase in chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, stroke and obesity.
- Canadian children and youth have poor eating habits including high levels of sugar, fat and salt and low levels of vegetable and fruit intake.



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## Why this approach?

### Policy approach

- A restriction on *all* commercial marketing of foods and beverages is more feasible than a restriction based on unhealthy foods and beverages with respect to ease of implementation. This is partly because the majority of foods and beverages marketed to children and youth are unhealthy. Addressing all commercial marketing of foods and beverage avoids the challenge of defining unhealthy foods, which has been a challenge in policies elsewhere and because it requires significantly more administrative effort. Restrictions on the commercial marketing of all foods and beverages would still allow for public health campaigns to promote healthy unprocessed whole foods, provided the marketing is non-commercial.

### Scope of marketing

- It is essential that the scope of marketing restrictions to children be broad and comprehensive to ensure fulsome protection of young Canadians.
- Marketing mediums beyond just traditional broadcast (television and radio) have become increasingly influential and as such the Canadian solution needs to cover all marketing mediums including online, social media, film, advergames, apps, videogames, out of home marketing, product placement, food/beverage product packaging, sponsorship, promotions, celebrity endorsements, logo placement, etc.
- In the digital age, more young Canadians are being targeted with marketing online and through smart phones. One quarter of grade 4 students in Canada report owning a mobile device, and this number jumps to half of students by grade 7.
- Food and beverage companies track behaviours online which empowers companies to understand the power of various marketing techniques, create personalized behavioural profiles that appeal to children and deliver advertising that targets a child's specific interests.
- Other jurisdictions that have implemented broadcast restrictions on marketing to children have now recognized the gaps in their policies and are now extending regulations to apply to online and social media avenues.

### Nutrient profiling

- A strong and robust nutrient profiling system would be essential should regulations only apply to unhealthy food and beverages. It is recommended that governments use a public-health developed nutrient criteria based on best practices for assessing the healthfulness of food and beverage products.

### Age thresholds

- Both children and youth are vulnerable to marketing. Before age five, most children cannot distinguish ads from unbiased programming. Those under 8 do not understand the intent of marketing messages and believe what they see. By age 10 to 12, children are still not always able to be critical of these ads.
- Adolescents are overwhelmed by hormonal changes and the part of their brain that controls inhibition or self-restraint (the prefrontal cortex) is not fully developed. This increases their vulnerability to marketing.
- Teens are particularly susceptible to digital marketing (transmitted to personal computers, tablets and smartphones) since it blurs the lines between marketing and entertainment, arouses their emotions and can derail their ability to make good decisions.

### Mandatory interventions work

- Industry-driven, voluntary measures such as the Canadian Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CAI) have not proven to be sufficiently effective to change the marketing practices in our environment. Research shows that children's exposure to fast food advertising and total average food/beverage advertising exposure have increased since the initiative began.
- The industry-developed nutrient criteria is weak compared to that developed by public health nutrition experts. Three quarters of unhealthy ads viewed online by children and youth are from companies that participate in the CAI. Some sugary breakfast cereals (e.g. "Lucky Charms") are considered a "healthier for you" product under the CAI. Regulation will create an even playing field for all companies.



- Population-based policy efforts are the most cost-effective tool to improve health outcomes. Regulations on marketing to children have strong return on investment. Such measures can impact a whole generation of young Canadians, improving health outcomes and averting health care expenditures.
- Marketing to children has been found to be unethical and manipulative in many jurisdictions. For example, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the Quebec advertising ban on children is a reasonable limit on the right to free speech and that "...advertising directed at young children is per se manipulative."
- The Quebec advertising ban is associated with an increased probability of reductions in fast-food sales, averaging 13% per week. This translates to 16.8 million fewer fast food meals sold in the province, and an estimated 13.4 million fewer fast-food calories consumed per year.
- Quebec also has the lowest rates of obesity among 6-11 year olds and the highest fruit and vegetable consumption rate in Canada. Positive outcomes have also been found in other jurisdictions with marketing restrictions.
- Various other jurisdictions including Mexico, UK, Brazil, Ireland, Chile, Taiwan, Sweden and Norway among others have introduced restrictions on marketing to children as a means to improve population health.
- The 2012 *Curbing Childhood Obesity: A Federal, Provincial and Territorial Framework for Action to Promote Healthy Weights* calls upon all three levels of government to adopt interventions to prevent and control obesity. The report specifically points to the "protection of children from the marketing of food and beverages high in fat, sugar and/or sodium" as an evidence informed strategy to decrease obesity.
- This 2012 Framework for Action was reiterated in the 2016 Report of the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, *Obesity in Canada: A Whole-of-Society Approach for a Healthier Canada* as a key measure to reduce obesity among young Canadians.
- This may be the first generation of children to have a shorter lifespan than their parents as a result of premature death related to chronic disease. Governments need to create healthy, supportive environments that will allow children to grow up healthy and free of disease.
- Treatment of chronic diseases and other illnesses takes up 67% of health care spending and costs the Canadian economy \$190 billion annually in direct and indirect costs. These numbers are expected to grow as chronic disease rates are increasing by approximately 14% each year.
- Breaking the cycle of marketing, poor eating habits and increasing rates of chronic disease requires prevention measures. By taking action now, we can protect scarce health care resources for generations to come.

## Why now?

- Support for government intervention on marketing to children is consistently strong. In a 2016 Pollara poll almost 80% of Canadians support restrictions on the marketing of unhealthy food and beverages to children 16 years and under. The majority of Canadians (77%) believe it is hard to monitor and control the advertising that is directed at children. Similarly, 71% believe that because the food and beverage industry spends so much money on advertising to kids it has an unfair advantage over parents when it comes to influencing children's eating and drinking habits.
- Heart & Stroke is proud to be a founding member of The Stop Marketing to Kids (Stop M2K) Coalition along with the Childhood Obesity Foundation. The Stop M2K Coalition is made up of twelve non-governmental organizations with written endorsement from 70 health, social welfare and wellbeing organizations and health experts.
- The World Health Organization and other leading health advisory bodies have formally recommended a marketing ban for children.

## What are the benefits?

- Protecting children from uncontrolled exposure to marketing will assist parents to instill healthy habits with their children and youth. Once companies step back, parents will be able to more effectively take charge of their children's nutritional development.



- Restrictions around marketing to children are the most cost-effective childhood obesity interventions. Research has shown that 14 – 33% cases of childhood obesity could be prevented through removing unhealthy food advertising on television.
- Children and youth will grow up in a safe and protected environment without negative food influences until they are able to make informed and accurate decisions about marketing and food choices.
- Children and youth will have a greater chance to develop a healthy pattern of eating that will help set them on the path to a lifetime of good nutrition and lead to reductions in chronic disease over their lifetime.
- A healthier population leads to reduced health care and indirect costs (lost productivity) along with better academic performance for students.
- Opportunity for governments to take a leadership role in protecting the health of our children and sustaining our health care system over the longer term.

## Recommendations: How can we protect children and support parents?

Children and youth 16 years of age and younger should be protected from commercial food and beverage marketing and parents should be supported to teach their children healthy eating habits and food preferences. To make this a reality will take concerted effort from Canadians, governments, schools, communities and organizations.

### What can Canadians do?

- Limit their children's screen time.
- Eat a healthy, balanced diet including a variety of natural/whole and minimally processed foods. Eat more vegetables and fruit and choose whole grains.
- Consume fewer processed and pre-packaged foods and sugary drinks.
- Prepare meals at home as much as possible.
- Involve children and youth in planning and preparing meals.
- Promote, encourage and support policies that create healthier environments for children, including restrictions around food and beverage marketing.

### What can the federal government do?

- Enact legislation to restrict commercial food and beverage marketing to children and youth ages 16 and under as outlined in the *Ottawa Principles*, which are endorsed by the Stop Marketing to Kids Coalition. This legislation should:
  - afford substantial protection to children
  - be statutory in nature — the voluntary approach does not work — with clear policy definitions
  - adopt a wide definition of commercial marketing
  - restrict commercial marketing in child-focused settings (e.g. rec. centres, libraries and rinks.)
  - take action to manage cross-border media
  - be evaluated, monitored, resourced and enforced
  - be enacted quickly.
- Educate Canadians about the risks associated with unhealthy food and beverage consumption through public awareness and education campaigns.

### What can provincial governments do?

- Implement and enforce restrictions on the commercial marketing of foods and beverages to children and youth (see Quebec example which uses its Consumer Protection Act).
- Restrict exposure to food and beverage marketing in public places, including settings where children gather, such as nurseries, schools and school grounds, preschool and daycare centres, recreation centres, playgrounds, pediatric services, sporting or cultural activities, as well as hospitals.
- Restrict retail stores from arranging food and beverage product displays to attract children.
- Educate Canadians about the risks associated with unhealthy food and beverage consumption through public awareness and education campaigns. Consider media literacy as part of school curriculum to address marketing to children.
- Conduct a review of food and beverage marketing in child-focused settings.



- Review and limit sole-sourced contracts with food and beverage companies to ensure the healthfulness of food and beverage options. This would include the numbers, content and placement of vending machines.

### What can municipal governments do?

- Conduct a review of food and beverage marketing in child-focused settings.
- Review zoning restrictions close to child-focused settings including schools and playgrounds. Restrict food and beverage marketing to children on municipal property, such as childcare settings, schools, libraries, public transit, recreation centres and parks.
- Educate people about the risks associated with unhealthy food and beverage consumption through public awareness campaigns.
- Review and limit sole-sourced contracts with food and beverage companies to ensure the healthfulness of food and beverage options. This would include the numbers, content and placement of vending machines.

### What can schools and school boards do?

- Review and limit sole-sourced contracts with food and beverage companies to ensure the healthfulness of food and beverage options. This would include the numbers, content and placement of vending machines.
- Review, broaden and strengthen nutrition policies. These policies should include guidelines around the types of foods available to children; restrictions around food and beverage marketing including in educational materials, prizes and giveaways; and guidelines around foods and beverages used in fundraising and served at special events.
- Do not enter into incentive programs with food and beverage companies.
- Prioritize the implementation of healthy eating policies, resources and curriculum, including food preparation and media literacy.

### What can communities do?

- Advocate for healthy choices to be available in their neighbourhoods, including stores, to enable purchase of vegetables and fruit and fresh, whole foods.
- Advocate for restrictions on unhealthy food establishments near schools, recreation centres and other areas where children congregate.

- Push for policies in community centres to ensure healthy food and beverage choices are available and unhealthy choices are restricted.

### Health organizations

- Endorse the *Ottawa Principles* and the Stop Marketing to Kids Coalition at [stopmarketingtokids.ca](http://stopmarketingtokids.ca).
- Educate Canadians about the risks associated with unhealthy food and beverage consumption through public awareness and education campaigns.
- Advocate for healthier food and beverage environments so that healthy choices are the easy choices for Canadians.

### Institutions and corporations

- Educate themselves about the harmful risks of marketing food and beverage to children and youth.
- Stop the practice of marketing food and beverages to children.
- Retail stores should refrain from arranging food and beverage product displays to attract children.

**Life. We don't want you to miss it.™** That's why Heart & Stroke leads the fight against heart disease and stroke. We must generate the next medical breakthroughs, so Canadians don't miss out on precious moments. Together, we are working to prevent disease, save lives and promote recovery through research, health promotion and public policy.

#### END NOTES

1 Promotion through advertisements on television, billboards, magazines, direct mail, radio, internet ads, advergames, social media ads, video games, online contests, celebrity endorsements, sponsorships, mascots, campaigns that resemble health promotion programs and the gamification of food and beverages as well as any promotion in child focused settings like schools, recreation centres, entertainment complexes and children's events. Placement using strategic product positioning at children's eye level, in-store product displays and advertisements, point-of-sale merchandising, along with product placement in entertainment programs, school, day-care and recreation settings. Price techniques such as value discounting, coupons and offering additional incentives with purchase. Product development including the branding of energy dense-nutrient poor and/or processed food and beverage products to purposely appeal to children.

This statement is current as of May 2017

