



Protecting our Children: Restricting Food and Beverage Marketing to Kids

What needs to be done

Heart & Stroke recommends the federal government promptly introduce draft regulations in Canada Gazette I to restrict the marketing of food and beverages high in salt, sugars and saturated fats to children. The draft regulations should be informed by the best available evidence, expert opinion and consultations with stakeholders. The marketing restrictions should be as comprehensive as possible with respect to media, settings, and marketing techniques in order to achieve optimal protection of children's health. The following types of marketing should be considered:

- Broadcast (e.g., television, radio)
- Digital media including social media
- Point of sale (e.g., restaurants, convenience stores, supermarkets etc.)
- Any advertising within a 250-metre radius of schools
- Product packaging
- Cartoon characters (e.g., spokes-characters and licensed characters)
- Brand advertising from companies that produce food and beverages which are predominantly high in salt, sugars and saturated fats
- Digital geo-tracking of children used for targeted behavioural marketing

Strong monitoring will be necessary to assess impact and whether further restrictions are necessary.

Why we need to do this

Canadian diets are dominated by ultra-processed foods which are high in salt, sugars and saturated fats.¹ Children and youth (2-18) get **over half of their calories** from ultra-processed foods.² Ultra-processed food consumption is highest in children 9-13 years, making up nearly 60% of the calories in their diet.² In 2019, dietary risk factors contributed to an estimated 36,000 deaths and the burden of chronic diseases mainly impacted by diet and other modifiable risk factors is \$26 billion annually.^{3,4}

Each year, the Canadian food and beverage industry spends \$1.1 billion on marketing to children.⁵ This marketing appeals to children through product design, the use of cartoon or other characters, fantasy and adventure themes, humour, and through other marketing techniques.⁶ This frequent marketing works – children as young as three are brand aware and can recognize or name food and beverage brands.^{7,8} Children also prefer foods from a favoured brand⁹ and can influence the foods parents buy through pestering or nagging (referred to as “pester power”).¹⁰

Nearly 90% of food and beverages marketed on television are high in salt, sugars or saturated fat.¹¹ Research suggests that on television Canadian children (2-11) are mainly exposed to advertising of fast food (43%), candy and chocolate (12%), sit-down restaurants (8.8%) and regular soft drinks (5%).¹² Online, over 50 million food and beverage ads per year are shown on children’s top 10 websites and over 90% of those ads are for ultra-processed foods.¹³ Canadian children are observing an estimated 1,500 advertisements annually on social media sites alone.¹⁴

Food and beverage marketing and the consumption of foods high in salt, sugars and saturated fat may play a critical role in overweight and obesity in children¹⁵ and may contribute to poorer heart health in adolescents.¹⁶ Childhood and adolescent obesity can track into adulthood¹⁷ and poor diets high in ultra-processed foods are linked to an increase in cardiovascular disease, stroke, cancers, and mortality in later life.¹⁸⁻²⁰

In June 2021, the food and beverage industry revised their voluntary code to reduce marketing to children, however voluntary codes are not effective at truly managing the problem of marketing food and beverages high in salt, sugars and saturated fat to kids.²¹⁻²³ In one Canadian study, online food and beverage ads from companies who followed a voluntary code were 2.5 times less healthy than the regularly observed ads from companies who do not adhere to a code.²² In another study, non-permissible Canadian food and beverage ads (according to the voluntary code) were 63% higher during peak viewing times on children’s television than during off-peak viewing times.²¹ The food and beverage industry asserts that the new code replicates Quebec advertising guidelines, and meets or exceeds the latest Health Canada recommendations.²⁴ In Quebec, companies are not allowed to advertise to children under 13 on television, in newspapers, magazines or other media targeted to children.²⁵ However it is clear that the revised industry code falls short in many ways of the Quebec guidelines.

Why now

COVID-19 has underscored the urgent need for comprehensive and mandatory marketing regulations. A third of Canadians (35%) increased their consumption of junk food or sweets just three months into the pandemic.²⁶

Restrictions on marketing to children are among the most cost-effective and impactful childhood obesity interventions.²⁷⁻³⁰ An Australian study estimates a government investment of AU\$ 0.54 per child per year would be required to reduce the advertising of food and beverages high in sugars and fat on television.²⁷ A US study estimates a television fast food advertising ban could reduce the number of children (3-11) who are overweight by 18%.²⁹ An analysis of Quebec’s marketing legislation found that French speaking households with children had a 13% lower propensity to consume fast food than English speaking households with children.³⁰ English speaking households in Quebec spent more time watching unregulated English broadcasts originating from the US.³⁰ The difference in the propensity to consume translated to 13.4 billion fewer fast-food calories per year.³⁰

Canadians are largely in support of government action to address marketing to children. In one Heart & Stroke commissioned 2016 poll, 77% of Canadian parents said it is hard to monitor and control advertising directed to children.³¹ In a clear breach of privacy, children also have their personal identifying information collected from websites and apps for the purpose of targeted online marketing.^{32,33} In a separate 2020 poll, three in every four Canadians (75%) voiced support for the federal government restricting food and beverage companies from marketing food and beverages high in salt, sugars and saturated fat to children under 13.³⁴

Canada has committed to acting in the best interest of Canadian children by signing onto and ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, an international treaty to recognize and protect children’s rights, including the right to the highest attainable standard of health and adequate nutrition.^{35,36} The Government of Canada has also committed to full implementation of Canada’s Healthy Eating Strategy, including comprehensive restrictions on the marketing of food and beverages high in salt, sugars and saturated fat to children.³⁷ This commitment to marketing to kids restrictions was included in two election platforms, several mandate letters and the 2019 federal budget. **These commitments should be formalized with the prompt introduction of draft marketing to kids regulations in Canada Gazette I.**



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