

## **US adolescents get a fifth of their calories from fast food, study finds**

British Medical Journal 2010

Bob Roehr, Denver

A study of the 12 largest fast food chains in the United States has criticised the energy, sugar, fat, and sodium content in the foods they market to children. Its authors hope that a combination of public outrage and the threat of new laws and enforcement of existing laws on truth in advertising may bring about the changes they seek.

The report, by the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University, was presented on 8 November at the 138th annual meeting of the American Public Health Association in Denver.

It found that every day a third of US children and teenagers eat fast food; it is the source of 16-17% of the energy intake of adolescents. Furthermore, those companies “have been front and centre in making pledges to market less unhealthy food to children,” said Kelly Brownell, the centre’s director.

The US fast food industry spent more than \$4.2bn (£2.6bn; €3bn) on marketing in 2009, said Jennifer Harris, one of the authors. The exposure to advertising begins when children are as young as 2 years old.

“Some of it is targeted to children specifically, but just as important is their secondhand exposure to ads for adults,” which in fact are most of the advertisements they see, said Dr Harris. These advertisements promote larger portions and sugary drinks.

“The two fast food companies that have pledged to reduce unhealthy marketing to youth—McDonald’s and Burger King—have actually increased the number of ads that they show to children on television,” Dr Harris said. “Their child targeted marketing is rarely about the food; it is about building brand loyalty. In general the message to kids is the fun experience [of going to those places].”

She did acknowledge that the companies have done better in terms of providing healthier food alternatives where once none existed.

The centre analysed 3039 possible children’s meal combinations and found that only 12 met good nutrition criteria for preschoolers and 15 met the criteria for older children.

Their “mystery shopper” field researchers visited fast food locations to examine in-store marketing and the default combinations of food for children.

Marlene Schwartz, another researcher on the project, said, “In the majority of cases they were automatically given an unhealthy side dish and soft drink, with no healthy alternative offered by the sales person.”

The Subway sandwich shop chain was the only one where the default drink for the children’s meal package was milk or fruit juice rather than a soda drink.

Changing the default side dish, drink, and size of the portions is the first thing the companies could do to improve the healthiness of their products for children, said Dr Harris.

The centre also wants to change the definition of television programmes that require restrictions on the type of advertising aimed at children. Rather than the current standard of whether the programme is created solely for children, it wants a broader standard, such as the total number of children that watch a programme. That would extend the reach of child friendly advertising guidelines to such broadly popular shows as *American Idol* and *Glee*.

## Notes

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2010;341:c6406

## Footnotes

- The *Fast Food FACTS (Food Advertising to Children and Teens Score)* report and supporting materials for consumers are available at [www.fastfoodmarketing.org](http://www.fastfoodmarketing.org).