

Child obesity: It's the TV food ads, not the TV, study finds

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Courtesy UCLA
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To head off obesity in your kids, you don't have to prohibit TV, some scientists are advising. Instead, they say, steer youngsters toward programming without junk-food commercials, such as educational channels or DVDs.

That's because a new study indicates the link between TV and childhood obesity has more to do with the number of spots pushing junk food than with the amount of TV watching itself.

University of California Los Angeles researchers gathered data from primary caregivers of 3,563 children, ranging from infants to 12-year-olds, in 1997. Through time-use diaries, study respondents reported their children's activities, including TV viewing, throughout a full weekday and weekend day.

Caregivers were also asked to report the format—TV programs, DVDs or videos—and the names of the programs watched. This data was used to classify viewing into either educational or entertainment, and to find out whether it contained advertising or product placement. A follow-up was conducted in 2002.

The analysis accounted for the amount of physical activity and the children's gender, age, ethnicity, mother's weight status, education and sleep time. Commercial viewing was significantly associated with higher body mass index, a standard measure of obesity, the study found; the effect was stronger for children under seven.

The results suggest "the association between commercial television viewing and obesity does not arise solely or even primarily because heavier children prefer commercial television," said Frederick J. Zimmerman, chair of Health Services at the university's School of Public Health and the study's lead author.

Non-commercial viewing, including DVDs or educational television, had no significant association with obesity, the authors added. The findings, they said, also suggest that steering children away from commercial television may be effective in reducing childhood obesity, given that food is the most-advertised product on children's television that almost nine in 10 children start watching the tube regularly before age two.

By the time they're five, children have seen an average of more than 4,000 food commercials annually, the researchers noted; and during Saturday morning cartoons, children see an average of one food ad every five minutes, mostly for junk food. "Commercial television pushes children to eat a large quantity of those foods they should consume least: sugary cereals, snacks, fast food and soda pop," Zimmerman said.

The authors conclude that the availability of high-quality, enjoyable and educational programs for all ages on DVD should make it relatively easy for health educators and care providers to nudge children's viewing toward content that's healthier for mind and body.

"Just as there are far better and more nutritious foods than those advertised on television, there are also far better and more interesting shows on television than those supported by advertising," Zimmerman said. "Educational television has come a long way since today's parents were children, and there are now many fantastic shows on commercial-free television and, of course, wonderful content available on DVD."

The study is published in the *American Journal of Public Health*.