

# Joint statement on protecting children from unhealthy food marketing.

March 2022

We, the undersigned health organisations and individuals, call on the NSW government to remove unhealthy food<sup>1</sup> advertising from property owned by, or contracted to, the NSW Government, particularly public transport.

- Food advertising influences children's food choices and consumption.
- Protecting children from unhealthy food marketing is recognised worldwide as vital to address obesity rates and is a policy achievement in the National Preventive Health Strategy 2021-2030.
- ACT government advertising revenue has not been impacted by limiting advertising on transport to healthy foods
- Following the restrictions on unhealthy advertising put in place by Transport for London in 2019, Londoners purchased about 385 calories (1610 kJ) less per person per week.

The NSW government's leadership and commitment to improving the food environment and the health of the NSW community must extend to policies for advertising space in publicly owned or controlled places. The current practice of accepting money for advertising from companies that make and sell unhealthy foods and drinks conflicts with healthy eating advice and contributes to the ubiquitous promotion of these foods to children.

Responsible policy action to restrict unhealthy food marketing supports existing program investments in NSW to promote healthy eating among children and families and is timely, given the impact of COVID-19 on the population and the increased risk posed by COVID-19 to those living with obesity.



Cancer Council NSW



Australian Dental Association NSW



Australian Medical Association NSW



Diabetes NSW



Dietitians Australia



Early Start at University of Wollongong



Healthy Kids



Heart Foundation NSW



Nutrition Australia NSW



Parents' Voice



Public Health Association of Australia (NSW)



Western Sydney Leadership Dialogue

**Prof Louise Baur AM, FAHMS.**  
President-Elect, World Obesity Federation

**Dr Rosemary Stanton OAM,**  
Senior Visiting Fellow, School of Medical Sciences, UNSW

<sup>1</sup> Unhealthy food refers to food and drinks that are discretionary choices according to the Australian Dietary Guidelines

## Why must we protect children from unhealthy food marketing?

Children's exposure to food marketing influences their food and food brand knowledge, preferences, eating habits and weight and health outcomes.<sup>1,2</sup>

Reducing children's exposure to unhealthy food marketing is recommended by both the World Cancer Research Fund and the World Health Organization as a cost-effective wide-reaching obesity prevention strategy.<sup>3,4</sup> Reducing children's exposure to unhealthy food marketing was one of the top five focus areas raised by participants to the 2020 consultation on the National Obesity Strategy<sup>5</sup> and is listed as a policy achievement in the National Preventive Health Strategy 2021-2030.<sup>6</sup>

The burden of overweight and obesity in NSW is large, placing unsustainable pressures on tertiary healthcare systems and impacting the quality of life for millions of people. More than 1 in 2 adults and almost 1 in 4 children (5-16 years) in NSW live with overweight or obesity (2019).<sup>7</sup> Many of those children will go on to carry that excess weight into adulthood, increasing their risk of developing chronic health conditions including diabetes, heart disease and many cancers.<sup>3</sup>

Companies that make and sell unhealthy foods and drinks target children with manipulative advertising that encourages unhealthy eating habits and sets them up for a lifetime of poor health. We are asking the NSW government to make life easier for parents and give our children the best chance to grow into healthy adults.

## What is unhealthy food?

In August 2018, the COAG Health Council released an agreed definition of unhealthy food, the *National interim guide to reduce children's exposure to unhealthy food and drink promotion*.<sup>8</sup> The guide was designed to be used by governments that were considering policies to reduce children's exposure to marketing of unhealthy foods. The guide is consistent with the healthy eating recommendations outlined in the Australian Dietary Guidelines. Research shows this guide is more effective and easier to administer than other proposed nutrition criteria.<sup>9</sup>

## How much of a problem is unhealthy food advertising on public transport?

Advertising of unhealthy foods, particularly on public transport, reaches a significant number of children.

- An audit of five Sydney bus stations in February 2022 found 83.4% of food advertisements on buses in the sample were for unhealthy foods.<sup>10</sup>
- An audit of 178 train stations on the Sydney network found that, of all the advertisements for food, over 84% were for unhealthy foods and drinks.<sup>11</sup>
- A study of 53 routes to school via bus, train or walking, found 32% of advertisements were for foods or drinks and 75% of those promoted unhealthy products. Depending on travel mode, children could be exposed to between 1.7 to 7.3 advertisements for unhealthy foods on each trip to school.<sup>12</sup> Over a year, children would be exposed to more than 2,800 unhealthy food advertisements if travelling on trains and 1,000 unhealthy food advertisements if travelling on buses to and from school.
- An environmental scan of six major train stations and buses around those stations in February 2018 found 82% of food advertisements were for unhealthy foods<sup>13</sup>, and an audit of 90 buses on school bus routes to suburban Sydney primary and secondary schools in November 2018 found 72% of food and drink advertisements were promoting unhealthy products.<sup>14</sup>

In 2019, 65% of the NSW community supported a ban on advertising of unhealthy foods that targets children and 56% indicated support for a ban on unhealthy food and drink advertising on government-owned property.<sup>15</sup>

In 2015, the ACT Government introduced a policy to allow only advertising of healthy foods on Transport Canberra buses. Since then, the ACT Health Directorate reports that: "*Whilst it is not possible to quantify revenue lost from food or drink campaigns, the total revenue generated year on year continues to grow since the introduction of the ACT Healthy Food and Drink Marketing Policy.*"

The restrictions on unhealthy advertising put in place by Transport for London in 2019 resulted in weekly household purchases of unhealthy foods dropping by 1,000 kcal on average; equivalent to 1610kJ per person per week.<sup>16</sup> Average weekly purchases also showed a drop in saturated fat (26g) and sugar (80g).<sup>15</sup>

The governments in both Queensland and Western Australia have made a commitment to implement policies on food marketing on state-owned property.

## What else should the NSW Government do to protect children from marketing of unhealthy foods?

Actions to improve the food environment in NSW cannot reach their full potential unless they are supported by national action. We are calling on the NSW government to demonstrate national leadership to develop regulation that reduces Australian children's exposure to marketing of unhealthy foods. This regulation should **1)** ensure TV, radio and cinemas are free from unhealthy food marketing from 6am to 9:30pm; **2)** prevent companies from targeting children with marketing for unhealthy foods; **3)** ensure public spaces and events are free from marketing for unhealthy foods; and **4)** protect children from digital marketing.<sup>17</sup>

Contact: [nutrition@nswcc.org.au](mailto:nutrition@nswcc.org.au)



Image credit Cancer Council WA

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