

Why must we protect children from unhealthy food¹ marketing?

Children's exposure to food marketing influences their food and food brand knowledge, preferences, eating habits and weight and health outcomes.^{i,ii}

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.^{iii,iv} Reducing children's exposure to unhealthy food marketing is a strategy in the National Obesity Strategy 2022-2032^v and is listed as a policy achievement in the National Preventive Health Strategy 2021-2030.^{vi}

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 (2021).^{vii} 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.ⁱⁱⁱ

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.

The NSW Healthy Eating and Active Living Strategy 2022-2032^{viii} fails to address unhealthy food marketing to children despite it being in the previous strategy.

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*.^{ix} 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.^x

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.^{xi}
- An audit of 178 train stations on the Sydney network found that, of all the advertisements for food, over 84% were for unhealthy foods.^{xii}
- A study of 53 routes to school via bus, train or walking, found 32% of advertisements were for foods and of those 75% 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.^{xiii} 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^{xiv}, and an audit of 90 buses on school bus routes to suburban Sydney primary and secondary schools in November 2018 found 72% of food advertisements were promoting unhealthy products.^{xv}

In 2022, 70% of the NSW community supported a ban on advertising of unhealthy foods that targets children and 60% indicated support for a ban on unhealthy food and drink advertising on government-owned property.^{xvi} These rates have increased by about five percentage points since 2019.^{xvii}

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



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.^{xviii} Average weekly purchases also showed a drop in saturated fat (26g) and sugar (80g).^{xviii} Using this study, researchers have estimated that the policy could save the NHS £218 million over the lifetime of the current population. That is based on 94,867 fewer cases of obesity, 2,857 fewer cases of diabetes and 1,915 fewer cases of cardiovascular disease. They also stated the policy is likely to have the biggest impact on socio-economically disadvantaged groups.^{xix}

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.^{xx}

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ⁱⁱⁱ World Health Organization. Best Buys and Other Recommended Interventions for the Prevention and Control of Non Communicable Diseases, The updated Appendix 3 of the WHO Global NCD Action Plan 2013-2020. 2017

^{iv} World Cancer Research Fund. NOURISHING framework: World Cancer Research Fund; 2015 [updated 15/09/2017. Available from: <http://www.wcrf.org/int/policy/nourishing-framework>

^v Commonwealth of Australia. The National Obesity Strategy 2022-2032. Health Ministers Meeting; 2022

^{vi} Australian Government Department of Health. National Preventive Health Strategy 2021-2030: Commonwealth of Australia; 2021

^{vii} HealthStats NSW 2021

^{viii} NSW Ministry of Health. NSW Healthy Eating and Active Living Strategy 2022-2032. 2022.

^{ix} COAG Health Council. National interim guide to reduce children’s exposure to unhealthy food and drink promotion 2018. Available from: <https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2022/06/national-interim-guide-to-reduce-children-s-exposure-to-unhealthy-food-and-drink-promotion-2018-national-interim-guide-to-reduce-children-s-exposure-to-unhealthy-food-and-drink-promotion-coag-health-council-2018.pdf>.

^x Watson WL, Khor PY, Hughes C. Defining unhealthy food for regulating marketing to children—What are Australia’s options? *Nutrition & Dietetics*. 2021;78(4):406-14

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^{xvi} Cancer Council NSW. NSW Community Survey on Cancer Prevention 2022, Community attitudes on protecting children from unhealthy food marketing. 2022

^{xvii} Watson WL, Sarich P, Hughes C, et al. Monitoring changes in community support for policies on obesity prevention. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*. 2021;45(5):482-90.

^{xviii} Yau A, Berger N, Law C, et al. Changes in household food and drink purchases following restrictions on the advertisement of high fat, salt, and sugar products across the Transport for London network: A controlled interrupted time series analysis. *PLOS Medicine*. 2022;19(2):e1003915

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