

Nutrition Recommendations for Foods Marketed to Children

[Announcer] This program is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[Bret Atkins] Food marketing has emerged as an environmental factor that can shape the dietary behaviors of American children. I'm your host, Bret Atkins, and this is an author interview for CDC's journal *Preventing Chronic Disease*. On the phone with me today from Michigan State University in the Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition is Dr. Lorraine Weatherspoon and from the Department of Advertising and Public Relations, Dr. Elizabeth Taylor Quilliam. Drs. Weatherspoon and Quilliam are authors of a study published in the September 26, 2013 issue of *Preventing Chronic Disease*, and today we're asking them questions about the impact food advertising can have on children. Thank you both for joining us today.

[Lorraine Weatherspoon] It is really a pleasure for us to join you today at this podcast. Thank you for inviting us.

[Elizabeth Quilliam] Yes, I echo Lorraine's comments. Thank you, happy to be here.

[Bret Atkins] Well, Dr. Quilliam, your study focuses on the use of advergames in the marketing of unhealthy foods to children. Tell our listeners what advergames are and how they can shape children's dietary behaviors.

[Elizabeth Quilliam] Advergames are typically free, branded online games. They're quick, easy-to-play games that use brand names, logos, pictures of the product, or even brand spokes characters as active components of the game. So they might have a brand spokes character as a game avatar, or they might have a food object that's being advertised incorporated in as something the child has to collect during the game. Compared to a typical TV commercial for a product that would last maybe 30 seconds, these games are fun and engaging and the child can play them for much longer periods of time, so they're really virtually playing with food. And the line between entertainment and advertising gets blurred because children aren't, don't have the cognitive development to necessarily recognize persuasive message when it's hidden as entertainment.

[Bret Atkins] How easy is it for children to find these games?

[Elizabeth Quilliam] We did some previous research and located hundreds of these games on food marketers' websites. And we looked specifically at 143 of them and found secondary data showing that they're actively being played by children. So, for this study we looked at 145 different websites with 439 food brands that are being promoted through advergames.

[Bret Atkins] Dr. Weatherspoon, what did you find were the most common types of foods being marketed to children and what were their nutritional value?

[Lorraine Weatherspoon] I think when think about the fact that inappropriate high-calorie food choices and portions are things that we are very concerned about with regard to the quality of children's diets. One of the things that we were concerned about was that the majority of the foods that received the most amount of interest relative to these advergAMES were those that tended to be very energy dense, high in calories, and not very high in multiple nutrients, such as high sugar snacks, and cereals, as well as some that were high in fat, such as instant or canned soups, sugar-sweetened beverages—and we know that there are a lot of concerns about sugar-sweetened beverages today—and then of course the age old candy. There were lots of games that centered around high-fat, high-sugar candy products.

[Bret Atkins] What are your thoughts on how improvements could be made regarding this type of marketing to youth?

[Lorraine Weatherspoon] Well, I think one of our big concerns relative to this paper that we've just published is that there aren't any consistent standards for what can or cannot be marketed and how the marketing can be done. We firmly believe that some kind of federally-mandated policy, especially when it comes to children, so that there's better control, potentially, on the type and amount of marketing, as well as the kinds of foods that are targeted, needs to be addressed. And this is not just a big problem in the U.S. I think that it's a global corporate responsibility. Our kids are our future and unfortunately, and I think that Dr. Quilliam will mention this a little later on, but with the fact that most of this marketing is subjected to self-regulation, it really, really is not necessarily governed by a health-centered approach.

[Bret Atkins] Do you think there's any correlation between this type of food marketing and childhood obesity rates?

[Lorraine Weatherspoon] I think what we are finding, I don't think we, unfortunately our study does not prove any cause or didn't show any cause of effects; however, given what I just said earlier on that the types of foods that seem to be targeted are those that are high in calories as well as those that are high in fat, as well as sodium, and our concerns about obesity and other dietary-related diseases, relative to not just food intake but physical activity and the fact that these kids are playing these games, so they're probably more likely sedentary, and it's more of an entertainment thing versus a, it's perceived as an entertainment thing versus a, something that people would typically consider to be an advertisement per say. I think that there's definitely a link because you've got the sedentary aspect as well as we've got the choices that seem to move toward unhealthy, high-calorie, nutrient-poor choices, which could definitely fuel the weight crisis that we have.

[Bret Atkins] Dr. Quilliam, do you think this kind of advertisement through gaming could be used to promote healthy eating among children?

[Elizabeth Quilliam] Uh, yes, I do and that's definitely one of our goals. We believe that this type of gaming is still kind of flying under the radar for a lot of parents. They may not be aware that their children are even playing this type of game, but we as part of our next line of research

we hope that we can translate the use of engaging entertaining online tactics to this to teach healthy eating and other healthy lifestyle behaviors to kids.

[Bret Atkins] Thank you both for joining us. Listeners can read the study we discussed online at cdc.gov/pcd.

[Announcer] The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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