Why It Matters

For the majority of Americans who do not use tobacco, the most important behaviors to reduce cancer risk are maintaining a healthy weight, making healthy dietary choices, participating in regular physical activity, and limiting alcohol consumption.[[1]](#endnote-1) Overweight and obesity are clearly associated with an increased risk of developing 13 cancers: endometrial, esophageal adenocarcinoma, gastric cardia, liver, kidney, multiple myeloma, meningioma, pancreatic, colorectal, gallbladder, breast, ovarian, and thyroid.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Obesity rates have doubled among adults and tripled among children in the U.S. in recent decades.[[3]](#endnote-3) Currently, 35% of youth aged 2-19[[4]](#endnote-4) and 71% of adults[[5]](#endnote-5) are overweight or obese. Yet many of these same children are undernourished, with low intakes of fruit and vegetables, legumes, and whole grains that would provide the necessary nutrients for growth and development of their bodies and brains.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Research shows that our food preferences are established when we are very young and can influence our dietary choices for a lifetime.[[7]](#endnote-7) Children who are overweight or obese are also more likely to remain overweight in adulthood.[[8]](#endnote-8) Being overweight or obese can have negative impacts on children, both physically and psychologically.[[9]](#endnote-9) Excess body weight is also associated with poor academic achievement and a decreased quality of life.[[10]](#endnote-10)

What children eat today will impact their future cancer risk. Unhealthy food marketing to youth has been shown to be a major contributor to poor diet choices[[11]](#endnote-11)

The marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages creates an environment that fosters harmful consumption choices. Restricting inappropriate marketing is an important strategy for promoting nourishing food and beverage choices that support optimal growth and development of children and reduce cancer risk.

The Harm of Marketing Unhealthy Foods and Beverage

Food and beverage companies spend billions of dollars each year to aggressively market foods to youth that are high in sugars, fats and salts while there is almost no marketing of fruits, vegetables and whole grains.[[12]](#endnote-12) Companies target youth and adolescents with a variety of strategies, including food packaging, toys, television, radio, billboards, print ads, as well as “point of sale” advertising in stores and fast food restaurants.[[13]](#endnote-13) They also sponsor sporting events, scholarships and contests, and they pay for product placement in movies and TV shows.[[14]](#endnote-14) In recent years, they have been able to target ads for products like sodas, energy drinks, candy and fast food through phones, gaming platforms, and social media sites, so youth are exposed to this marketing many times each day.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Research has demonstrated that advertising of food and beverages is associated with children’s purchase requests, consumption patterns, and body weight.[[16]](#endnote-16) Adolescent brains are still developing, so they are less able to resist immediate pleasure, like a sweet treat, in favor of a more abstract future benefit like health.[[17]](#endnote-17) Everyday, 64% of youth under age 20 consume at least one sugary beverage and 41% of teens consume fast food.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Promoting Inequity

By virtue of their zip code, low-income youth are exposed to more junk-food advertising on billboards and window advertising.[[19]](#endnote-19) Low-income neighborhoods are less likely to have access to affordable, healthy food options. They are more likely to live near fast-food restaurants and to rely upon corner stores instead of supermarkets for groceries.[[20]](#endnote-20) Low-income communities suffer higher rates of nutrition-related disease than their higher income counterparts, and they are also exposed to more junk-food advertising.

Ethnic minority youth from all income levels are also exposed to higher levels of junk food marketing. In fact, while total spending for television advertising of food decreased slightly from 2013 to 2017, total food-related advertising for black audiences increased by more than 50%.[[21]](#endnote-21) Marketers use cultural icons and appeal to ethnic identity to promote unhealthy food and drink choices to black and Hispanic/Latino youth.[[22]](#endnote-22) The majority of this advertising is for fast-food, candy, snack foods, or sugary drinks.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Policy Strategies for More Responsible Food & Beverage Marketing to Youth

There is no single policy to effectively address the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to youth. ACS CAN supports the following recommendations as possible strategies to reduce the quantity of unhealthful marketing, mitigate the impact of unhealthy marketing that persist, and increasing healthier options.

* Support policies for healthy default options for kids’ meals by requiring that milk or water, instead of sodas, be offered as the default beverages. These policies may also require that fruit, vegetables or yogurt be offered as sides, instead of French fries or desserts.
* Advocate for policies that mandate healthy vending in machines, concession stands, or cafeterias in all public places, public parks, recreation facilities, and other government sites.
* Support policies that require all food marketed in schools meet the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Smart Snacks in School nutrition standards.

*For more information on ACS CAN’s advocacy work around healthy eating and active living environments, please visit* [*https://www.fightcancer.org/what-we-do/healthy-eating-and-active-living*](https://www.fightcancer.org/what-we-do/healthy-eating-and-active-living)*.*

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