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Fat chance for Mr Vegie TV ads

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Fat chance for Mr Vegie TV ads

Abstract

There has been much recent debate about how to combat Australia's childhood obesity epidemic and, in particular, considerable controversy about regulations relating to food advertising to children on television. Three separate research studies on food advertising in Australia, conducted in 2002,¹ 2005² and 2006,³ including those by the authors, describe the frequency and proportion of television advertisements for fruit and vegetables, as well as for high-fat/high-sugar foods.

Keywords

mr, tv, fat, ads, vegie, chance

Disciplines

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Fat chance for Mr Vegie TV ads

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There has been much recent debate about how to combat Australia's childhood obesity epidemic and, in particular, considerable controversy about regulations relating to food advertising to children on television. Three separate research studies on food advertising in Australia, conducted in 2002,¹ 2005² and 2006,³ including those by the authors, describe the frequency and proportion of television advertisements for fruit and vegetables, as well as for high-fat/high-sugar foods.

Increasing fruit and vegetable consumption is important for chronic disease prevention and promoting healthy weight. It is particularly important as a national nutrition priority given the results of the 1995 National Nutrition Survey, which indicated that less than 50% of children and 25% of adolescents had adequate fruit intake and only 33% of children and adolescents met the recommended intake for vegetables.⁴ Given evidence from recent international reviews indicating that television advertising affects children's food preferences and consumption,^{5,6} it is worthwhile to reflect on the potential effect of advertisements for fruit and vegetables. Table 1 shows the proportion of food advertisements for fruit and vegetables compared with those for high-fat/high-sugar foods during children's viewing periods, as defined by the Children's Television Standards, in these three studies. The 2005 study conducted by The Cancer Council New South Wales² coincided with the Federal Government's 'Go for 2&5' campaign,

with Mr Vegie Man promoting fruit and vegetables, which was screened over a 10-week period. This \$5-million campaign was based on a successful Western Australian campaign, which over a period of three years saw an increase of half a serve of fruit per day and a third of a serve of vegetables per day.⁷

During this 'Go for 2&5' nutrition promotion campaign, the proportion of advertisements for fruit and vegetables was the highest recorded across all three studies. However, when considering children's exposure to this social marketing campaign, advertisements for fruit and vegetables only equated to 4.6% of total food advertisements during children's viewing periods.² Exposure to fruit and vegetable advertising remained diminutive even during a major nutrition campaign, compared with the levels of advertising for high-fat/high-sugar foods (81.5% of all food advertisements).² This would suggest that the potential impact on children of the fruit and vegetable campaign is minor in relation to the impact of advertisements for high-fat/high-sugar foods.

While undoubtedly there are definite benefits of campaigns such as 'Go for 2&5', as demonstrated by its evaluation in Western Australia,⁷ the advertising environment in which these campaigns are positioned must be considered. Assuming equivalent effects of television advertisements for healthy and less healthy foods, then a ban on the advertisement of unhealthy foods, even for 10 weeks during such nutrition promotion campaigns, would enhance any effect of social marketing to further increase fruit and vegetable consumption. It appears that present government investment in seemingly worthwhile social marketing campaigns constitutes a drop in the ocean of food advertising.

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Table 1: Comparison of fruit and vegetable and high-fat/high-sugar food television advertisements during children's television viewing hours from three Australian studies.

Study year	Fruit and vegetable advertisements as a percentage of total food advertisements during children's viewing periods ^a	High-fat/high-sugar food advertisements as a percentage of total food advertisements during children's viewing periods ^a
2006 ³	3%	48.6%
2005 ²	4.6%	81.5%
2002 ¹	0.1%	53.7

Note:

(a) Children's viewing periods: Monday-Friday 7.00-8.00, 16.00-20.30, Saturday-Sunday 7.00-20.30.