



EMBARGOED UNTIL: 12:01 A.M. ET on January 30, 2025

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New Study Reveals Direct Link Between Children’s Exposure to Advertising of High-sugar Cereals and Purchases by Households with Children

Mandatory restrictions on advertising unhealthy foods directly to children are required to address negative effects of child-directed advertising on children’s diets and related health outcomes.

January 30, 2025, Hartford CT – High-sugar breakfast cereal brands target their TV advertising directly to children under age 12, resulting in greater household purchases of these unhealthy children’s cereals, according to a new study from researchers at the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health at the University of Connecticut.

The study’s findings, published today in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, revealed that advertising of high-sugar children’s cereals to children – but not to adults – leads to increased purchases of advertised children’s cereals in a large sample of households with children. These findings provide further evidence that the food industry’s promises to self-regulate child-directed food advertising will not have a meaningful impact on children’s diets until companies stop marketing unhealthy foods directly to children altogether.

“Despite promises to only advertise healthier options directly to children and the availability of nutritious cereals in their product portfolios, cereal companies continue to market their least healthy products directly to children,” according to the study’s lead author, Dr. Jennifer Harris of the Rudd Center at the University of Connecticut. “Our research provides strong evidence that discontinuing all advertising of nutritionally poor foods directly to children would likely negatively impact food companies’ bottom-line, which explains why they appear to resist doing the right thing for children’s health.”

The study examined volume purchases of ready-to-eat cereals by 77,000 U.S. households with children under age 12 over a 9-year time-period (2009 to 2017) using NielsenIQ Consumer Panel Data. Nielsen ratings data measured exposure to TV advertising for cereals by children (6-11 years) and adults from 2008 to 2017. Researchers modeled associations between advertising exposure by children versus adults and subsequent household purchases of advertised children’s cereal brands, including differences by household race, income, and head-of-household education, accounting for product price and household size. This is the first study to directly link food advertising exposure by children versus adults with subsequent purchases of advertised foods using a large independent longitudinal sample of households.

Key findings include:

- Nine children’s cereal brands were advertised directly to children across all nine years examined: Cocoa Puffs, Frosted Flakes, Froot Loops, Honey Nut Cheerios, Lucky Charms, Pebbles, Reese’s Puffs, Toast Crunch and Trix.

- On average, 30% of households with children purchased any of these cereal brands in a given month, representing 41% of all ounces of cereal purchased by sample households.
- There was a significant positive relationship between advertising to children and purchases of children's cereals by households across all races and education level, whereas the relationship between advertising to adults and cereal purchases was non-significant.
- Lower cereal price and greater household size also predicted higher household purchases of children's cereals.

The study found a few differences in effects of advertising by household socio-demographic characteristics. For example, advertising to children had a greater effect on cereal purchases by Black households than on other households. In addition, advertising to children increased purchases by households with middle or high incomes, but not households with low incomes.

These findings support public health experts' calls for significant improvements in the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI) food industry self-regulatory program, including stricter nutrition criteria for foods that can be advertised directly to children. However, this research also demonstrates that marketing high-sugar cereals directly to children produces greater sales over advertising to adults only. Given that the food industry is unlikely to discontinue this profitable marketing strategy, mandatory restrictions on unhealthy food marketing to children are required.

The study was co-authored by Jennifer L. Harris, PhD; Binod Khanal, PhD; Frances Fleming-Milici, PhD; and Tatiana Andreyeva, PhD. It was funded by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF). The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.

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About the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Health

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