



AUSTRALIAN DENTAL ASSOCIATION INC.

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## TELEVISION FOOD ADVERTISING AND CHILD ORAL HEALTH

### Introduction

The debate about regulating television food advertising during children's viewing times largely focuses on the link between advertising, poor diet and obesity. The impact of poor diet on dental health and dental health's relationship to general health is also of great concern.

### Television food advertising

Australian studies show that children view an average 23 hours of television per week with four hours of this time spent watching advertisements. It is estimated that food advertisements account for 30% of all advertisements during children's hours. Television advertisements largely feature food products that are high in fat, salt and sugar, and low in fibre.<sup>1</sup>

Over consumption of these foods can lead to both general and oral health problems.

Developmentally, young children are unable to discern the persuasive messages of advertising and tend to accept statements made in advertising as being true. The amount of time children spend watching television correlates with their request, parental purchase and child consumption of those foods advertised on television.<sup>2</sup>

### Childhood obesity

Levels of childhood obesity are rising throughout the western world. In the United States, one study has described obesity as reaching "epidemic proportions", affecting 10% to 15% of children in that country.<sup>3</sup> In Australia, it is estimated that 23% of children and adolescents are overweight, with 6% being obese. During the period from 1993-2003, the number of overweight children in Australia doubled while the number of obese children tripled.<sup>4</sup>

Health problems and disorders that affect overweight and obese adults with a history of childhood obesity include Type 2 diabetes, hypertension, cancer, stroke, dental decay, cardiovascular disease, and orthopaedic and psychological disorders.<sup>5,6</sup>

### Childhood dental decay

At the same time that obesity levels are rising, there are signs that the incidence of childhood dental decay is increasing. The ADA considers there is a clear link between the increased consumption of the type of foods advertised during children's viewing hours and the increase in childhood decay. Decay across children of all age groups increased during the period from 1996-1999, reversing the trend which saw a decline in rates of decay during 1991-1996. The trend since 1996 was most significant for five-year-old children who experienced a 21.7% increase in decay during this period.<sup>7</sup>

Australia's National Health and Medical Research Council's dietary guidelines for children and adolescents argue that "historically the prevalence of dental decay has increased when the diet has changed to include more sugars and other sweetened products".<sup>8</sup> Dental decay has been estimated to be Australia's most expensive diet-related disease.<sup>9</sup>

Left unchecked, poor dental hygiene in childhood will continue into adulthood, leading to a decline in general and oral health and subsequent pressures on the health budget for what are largely preventable problems.

### Promoting a healthy diet and good oral hygiene

The ADA endorses the Australian Dietary Guidelines developed by the National Health and Medical Research Council which recommend a diet with a wide variety of nutritious foods that are low in fat, salt and sugar.<sup>10</sup> The ADA recommends public health campaigns to promote a healthy diet;<sup>11</sup> the maintenance of good oral hygiene;<sup>12</sup> and fluoridation<sup>13</sup> of public water supplies as key measures for children (and indeed the whole population) to maintain good oral health.

### Regulating television food advertising

The ADA also supports calls by the Coalition on Food Advertising to Children for a ban on food advertising during children's viewing times.

*"The ADA considers there is a clear link between the increased consumption of the type of foods advertised during children's viewing hours and the increase in childhood decay."*

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