

Media Release

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Food marketing codes fail to protect children from junk food ads

New research from Cancer Council has found that food companies are exploiting loopholes in their marketing codes to push their products to children, with only 12% of complaints made about junk food marketing to children upheld.

The Australian-first study looked at six years' worth of complaints made about junk food being marketed to children and found the food industry codes fail to protect children. Loopholes are being exploited by food marketers and complaints made by concerned parents and the community are being ignored.

McDonald's, KFC, Cadbury, and Kellogg's were amongst the food brands that were the subject of complaints, many of them running ads that clearly appeal to children. Yet very few complaints were upheld due to flaws in the industry-designed codes.

Clare Hughes, Cancer Council's Nutrition and Physical Activity Committee Chair says, "The system is failing to protect our children from junk food marketing. Children's exposure to high levels of unhealthy food marketing affects the food and drinks that they like, ask for, buy, and consume.

"There's no denying that the ads we looked at were clearly targeting children, yet campaigns for products like Happy Meals, LCMs bars, KFC chicken and Cadbury Oreo bars are slipping through gaping loopholes in the current industry codes and reaching our children every day on buses, TV and online."

The industry codes are not set up to protect children from exposure to unhealthy advertising. The most common loophole being exploited by food companies is the term 'primarily directed to children' as often advertisers claim that rather than being directed to children the ad was equally of appeal to parents. An example of this was a McDonald's Happy Meal ad promoting Peter Rabbit toys. The complaint was dismissed because that theme was found to be appealing to children and to parents who would like to buy a treat for their children.

The research found several other loopholes being exploited, including:

- The codes mostly define children as under 14 years, whereas best practice defines children as someone under the age of 18
- Alongside the unhealthy food, ads feature people exercising and sharing food as the current codes say they should encourage physical activity and good dietary habits (including not promoting excessive consumption)
- Despite its name, not one complaint was upheld against the AANA Children's Advertising Code

In light of the findings, Cancer Council is calling for mandatory independent government regulation of food marketing to children.

Ms Hughes said, "The Government's draft National Obesity Prevention Strategy is now out for consultation. It includes an action to reduce exposure to unhealthy food and drink marketing, promotion and sponsorship. We know that the industry designed codes aren't

working, so we're pleased to see that food marketing to children is in the strategy, although to be truly effective it must protect children from exposure, not merely reduce exposure. The focus should now be on making sure this is high on the Government's priorities to action to stop companies exploiting these loopholes, and ultimately exploiting our children."

"The community can help too. If you see an ad you're concerned about, we want to hear from you. Visit our Our Kids Our Call campaign website to tell us about an ad you've seen or raise your concerns," Ms Hughes concludes.

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Notes to editor:

About the study

- *Monitoring complaints about food marketing to children under the Australian industry Codes 2015–20: a qualitative analysis* is published in Australia New Zealand Journal of Public Health. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1753-6405.13174>
- Currently in Australia, besides during 'C' and 'P' programs on TV, there is no regulation of food marketing to children with only food and advertising industry codes -- the food industry Codes, the Responsible Children's Marketing Initiative (RCMI) for grocery products and the Quick Service Restaurant Initiative for Responsible Advertising and Marketing to Children (QSRI) for fast food. In 2020, those codes came under the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) which already has Codes relevant to protecting children from unhealthy food advertising, the Code of Ethics, the Code of Advertising and Marketing to Children and the Food and Beverages Code.
- This study looked at six years of consumer complaints made about these codes and also compared the codes to the best practice recommendations from the World Cancer Research Fund.

About this topic

- Obesity is a serious health issue, but we recognise that it can be a sensitive issue for many people with often complex underlying causes. Cancer Council NSW is committed to conveying the seriousness and urgency of this issue for our community, while ensuring respectful reporting for individuals affected. With this in mind, we urge editors and producers to refrain from using imagery that would fuel stigma toward individuals. We would be happy to provide alternative image suggestions, if helpful.
- Our Kids, Our Call is a Cancer Council NSW campaign to stop junk food advertisers targeting our kids with manipulative advertising that encourages unhealthy eating habits and sets them up for a lifetime of poor health. Find out more on our website: <https://www.ourkidsourcall.com.au/>

About Cancer Council

Cancer Council is Australia's leading cancer charity working across every aspect of every cancer. Every day, we support families affected by cancer when they need it most, speak out on behalf of the community on cancer issues, empower people to reduce their cancer risk,

and find new ways to better detect and treat cancer. With your help, we're getting closer to a cancer free future every minute, every hour, every day.