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A THIRD OF COMMERCIALS IN STUDY Food tops ads aimed at kids

Snacks, candy found to be top subjects of TV pitches marketed to kids

SALLY SQUIRES - Washington Post WASHINGTON

Sex and violence are what many parents fear their children will consume too much of on television. But a new study finds that junk food is the top product served up to kids and teens on screen.

Released Wednesday by the Kaiser Family Foundation, the study is the largest ever conducted of television food marketing to children and teens.

It finds that "food is the number one product advertised to kids, followed by media such as music, video games and movies," said Vicky Rideout, vice president of the Kaiser Family Foundation's Program for the Study of Entertainment Media and Health. The study was conducted by Indiana University.

The study found that more than a third of commercials targeting children or adolescents are for candy and snacks -- often high-fat, sugary foods that are likely to fuel the ongoing childhood obesity epidemic.

By comparison, none of the commercials in the study promoted fruit or vegetables. Only 4 percent advertised dairy products -- a rich source of calcium, which most children fall short in consuming, according to the 2005 U.S. Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee.

"Data like this is always useful," said Lee Peeler, CEO of the National Advertising Review Council and head of a new food industry initiative on marketing to children.

One thing to keep in mind, Peeler said, is that the report was conducted on television shown in 2005. "A lot has changed since then," he said.

Some companies, including Disney and Kraft, have begun new efforts to promote more active lifestyles and healthier food to children. In November, the National Advertising Council started a new food and beverage initiative aimed at promoting a healthy lifestyle to children.

But others say those measures are not enough. The latest statistics suggest that if rates of overweight children continue to soar, today's youngsters could be the first in generations to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents because of weight-related chronic illnesses.

Children 8-12 Found to Watch Most of Ads

According to the study, children 8 to 12 years old watch the most food commercials, averaging 21 ads daily. That adds up to 7,600 a year. Teens, 13 to 17 years of age, see 17 food ads daily, or more than 6,000 per year, while youngsters 2 to 7 years of age view 12 foods ads a day, or 4,400 yearly.