Black children see more TV ads for junk food than white kids, study shows

By Caitlin Dewey, The Washington Post

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Many people in the United States struggle with obesity, a disease that causes an unhealthy level of body fat. Some populations struggle more with obesity than others, including African-Americans. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that nearly half of all black adults are obese in the United States.
That's what makes a new study on junk-food ads very important. It seems that fast-food chains, soda makers and snack salesmen are aiming their ads at black teens and children more and more.

**Junk-Food Ads Appearing On Certain Networks**

The study came from researchers at the University of Connecticut, where they measured the amount of TV watching by children and the number of food ads in the shows. The results showed that children in 2008 and 2012 spent almost the same amount of time watching TV. However, the study found that children saw more beverage ads in 2012 than in 2008. These results also found that black children watched almost 50 percent more junk-food advertising than white kids.

Frances Fleming-Milici at the University of Connecticut says this is not an accident. She believes food companies place ads to reach the black children watching specific TV networks like BET.

Earlier research had similar results. Black children spent far more time watching TV channels that had more food commercials.

**TV Ads Influence Children's Food Choices**

Last October, a scientific journal called Obesity Reviews published a study. It found that children who chose to eat unhealthy foods were being influenced by advertising for these unhealthy foods.

The Obesity Action Coalition estimates that nine out of every 10 food ads for kids are for sugary drinks, cereals, sweets, snacks and fast foods. Cara Shipley works to help obese children of color in Baltimore. She said her students know all the characters pictured in these commercials.

There was another study of Nickelodeon programming in the summer of 2015. It counted the number of food ads in 28 hours. The results showed that 65 percent of the
food ads were for unhealthy foods like Baby Bottle Pops, Fruit Gushers and Frosted Flakes.

**More Junk-Food Ads Appearing On TV**

Another problem is that many of the foods that have too many calories, unhealthy fats and too much sugar and salt are listed as healthy. The Children’s Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative has made this list. This is a group of 17 major food companies. For 10 years, they say they have been working to lower calories, fats, sugar and salt in foods for children under 12. However, they do not consider children over 12. Also, those food companies certainly don't think about what children watch, their race or if they are obese.

As a result, this new study found that 12-to 17-year-old black kids on average watched nearly 19 ads per day in 2008, but watched around 24 ads per day in 2012.

"There’s so much discussion right now about kids and healthy eating," Fleming-Milici said. She added there can't be an increase in eating healthy until there is a decrease in the number of TV ads for unhealthy foods.

**The Food Industry Decides What Is Healthy**

Should the government make rules to protect kids over 12 years old from food advertising? The World Health Organization recommends that governments should protect kids from junk-food ads, and has even suggested the definition of "kids" be increased to age 16. In the U.S., the food industry decides what is healthy and what will be advertised on TV.

That leaves the matter to parents, Fleming-Milici said, as well as teachers in programs like Shipley’s program in Baltimore. Today, sports stars and musicians appear in junk-food ads. Now, though, new programs have begun printing posters with their own healthy-eating famous people.
"[The kids] are really influenced by what's 'cool,'" Shipley said. "We're trying to reverse that, but the social pressure is huge."

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