

OP-05: Television marketing of food and non-alcoholic beverages (FNAB) high in fats to children in Sri Lanka

S. M. D. R. Samarakoon¹, A. N. Y. Senevirathne¹, H. Abeysinghe¹, B. G. W. W. P. Piyasena¹, V. P. Wickramasinghe², P. De Zoysa³, C. Arambepola⁴, S. T. Thoradeniya¹

¹Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, ²Department of Paediatrics, ³Department of Psychiatry, ⁴Department of Community Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

Introduction: Dietary fat exerts a significant risk of coronary heart disease (CHD) and obesity, which is on the rise in children. Television marketing of food and non-alcoholic beverages (FNAB) influences the dietary choices of children. There is a global interest in reducing fat, particularly trans-fat, contents in food and in regulating unhealthy FNAB marketing to children. This study aimed to explore the extent of the television marketing of FNAB high in fat, to which Sri Lankan children are potentially exposed.

Methods: The analysis was on FNAB products advertised over 33 hours on the three most popular television channels for children aged 4-16 years in Sri Lanka. The International Network for Food and Obesity/NCDs Research, Monitoring and Action Support (INFORMAS) Network Protocol was used, and the food products were categorised as ‘permitted’ or ‘non-permitted’ based on their fat content according to the WHO-South-East Asia Region (SEARO)-Nutrient Profile Model (NPM).

Results: Of the 1517 advertisements, 321 were on 56 FNAB products. Twenty FNAB products out of 56 (35.7%) were non-permitted to be marketed to children due to their high-fat content [biscuits (n=9), instant noodles (n=3), seasoning (n=2), burgers (n=2), pizzas (n=2), ice-cream (n=1) and milk formula for 2-5-year-olds (n=1)]. Notably, in all FNAB, there was no mention of trans-fat, except for pizza and burger. The advertisements on non-permitted food products included claims (e.g. biscuits: ‘Enriched with Vitamins A, D, and E’ and formula milk: ‘Fortified with Omega-3’) potentially masking the perception of the high-fat content in them.

Conclusions: More than one-third of the FNABs marketed on children’s popular television channels were non-permitted due to their high-fat content. Sri Lankan children watching popular channels are exposed to unhealthy FNAB advertisements. Regulatory actions are necessary to prevent this, therefore reducing the burden of CHD and obesity in children.

Keywords: fat, trans fat, FNAB marketing, television advertising, food advertising

Funding: International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Grant Number: 109170