

# Milkshakes, Sugary Cereals, Candy:

## WHAT NICKELODEON IS PEDDLING TO KIDS

Nickelodeon prides itself on being the number-one entertainment brand for kids. Over the years, parents, organizations, and members of Congress have written thousands of letters to Nickelodeon about its food advertising, yet the company still does not have a clear policy on food marketing to children. Studies show that food marketing to children affects children's diets and health.<sup>1</sup> Children ages 6 to 11 see an average of 12 televised food commercials per day—and most are for foods of poor nutritional value.<sup>2</sup>

The Center for Science in the Public Interest reviewed 28 hours of Nickelodeon programming in late May and early June 2015. We analyzed a composite of programming that aired from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. on a weekday and a weekend day. Nutritional quality was assessed using standards developed by a panel of experts convened by CSPI and based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. The standards include criteria for calories, saturated fat, sodium, added sugars, and the presence of positive nutritional value.<sup>3</sup> We found:



- A total of 787 advertisements were shown, of which 30% (235) were for foods, beverages, or restaurants.
- The most common products marketed to children were fast foods and other restaurant foods, sweetened yogurts, sugary cereals, and sweetened beverages. The remaining ads were for prepared foods or meals and candy/fruit snacks.<sup>4</sup>
- Of the food ads, 65% were for foods of poor nutritional quality, such as Baby Bottle Pops, Frosted Flakes, and Fruit Gushers. The absolute number of ads for foods of poor nutritional quality was higher in 2015 than 2012.
- Nickelodeon did not air a single public service announcement (PSA), nor any ads for fruit or vegetables, during the 28 hours of recorded programming.

Of the food ads shown, 77% were from companies that participate in the Children’s Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI). Although products met the CFBAI standards, only 46% of food ads by CFBAI companies met the expert nutrition standards. The most common reason that products from CFBAI companies failed to meet the expert standards was because they contained high amounts of added sugars. In contrast, 94% of the food ads from non-CFBAI companies—Chuck E. Cheese’s, Sonic, Wendy’s, Panera Bread, and Topps, among others—did not meet the expert standards.<sup>5</sup>

## Entertainment and Food

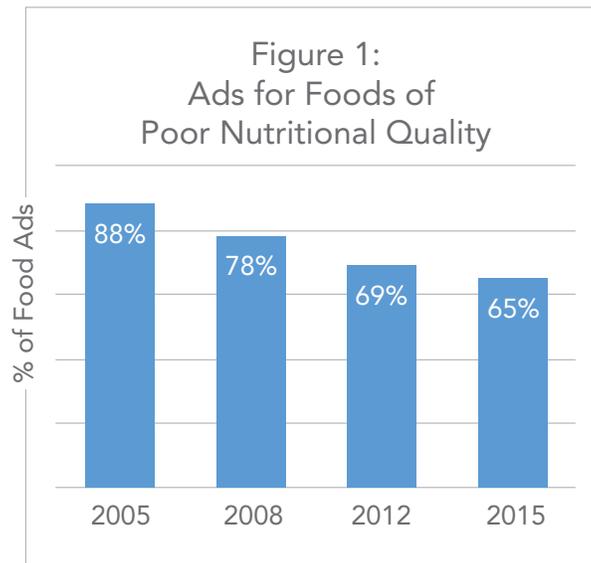
A large number of ads featured popular characters from movies. For example, characters from Minions marketed General Mill’s Fruit By The Foot, Fruit Roll-Ups, and Fruit Gushers in television commercials that could pass for a movie ad. One of the commercials shown most often in our sample was a Yoplait Go-Gurt commercial, which used characters from the Marvel movie Avengers: Age of Ultron. This movie is rated PG-13, yet aired during child-oriented programs such as Power Rangers: Dino Charge, The Fairly OddParents, and SpongeBob SquarePants.



An ad featuring Minions selling Fruit Gushers, Fruit By The Foot, and Fruit Roll-Ups to kids

## Changes over Time

CSPI analyzed food advertising on Nickelodeon in 2005, 2008, 2012, and most recently in 2015. Over that period of time, ads for unhealthy foods decreased from 88% of food ads in 2005 to 78% in 2008 to 69% in 2012 and 65% in 2015 (see Figure 1). While this decrease in the percentage of unhealthy food ads is encouraging, it is insufficient; a majority of food ads continues to be for foods of poor nutritional value.



In addition, progress appears to be slowing. Whereas previous analyses have measured nine or 10 percentage point drops in the proportion of unhealthy food ads, data from 2015 showed only 4 percentage point fewer ads for unhealthy foods than in 2012. Furthermore, while the percentage of ads marketing foods of poor nutritional value has decreased since 2005, the absolute number of such ads has not declined. The absolute number of ads for foods of poor nutritional quality ranged from 138 to 152 over the 10 years, with an unexplained dip in 2012 (61 ads).

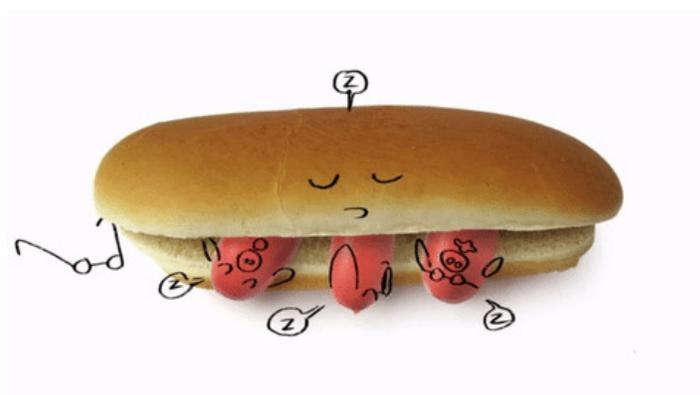
Another sign of progress is that the nutritional quality of the products advertised in 2015 has improved (see Table 1). In 2008, about 30% of the foods advertised on Nickelodeon failed to meet two or more of the criteria for saturated fat, sodium, or added sugars. None did in 2015. In 2015, few of the advertised foods failed to meet criteria for saturated fat and sodium, and the percentage of ads for foods excessive in added sugars decreased from 28% to 20% between 2008 and 2015. (Note that the numbers in Table 1 differ from Figure 1, because Table 1 does not record whether ads failed criteria for calories or positive nutrition.)

Table 1

<b>Fails Criteria for...</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2015</b>
Saturated Fat	32%	12%	2%
Sodium	16%	23%	0%
Added Sugars	28%	39%	20%
<b>Fails ≥ 2 Criteria</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>0%</b>

### Steps, Missteps, Future Steps

In 2007, Nickelodeon announced that it was taking some steps to address food marketing to children, focusing on the licensing of its characters to food companies. However, that policy has never been made publicly available, and more importantly, Nickelodeon characters are still being used on candy and other unhealthy foods. Furthermore, though Nickelodeon prides itself on its health and wellness efforts (such as through its Worldwide Day of Play, when Nickelodeon stops broadcasting for a few hours to encourage children to play outdoors), the network promotes consumption of unhealthy, processed foods daily. Even some of its bumpers—10-second clips that promote the network—feature unhealthy food. One such clip featured hot dogs “tucked in” to sleep in a white-flour bun. Another featured a video game-like SpongeBob, opening his mouth to eat burgers (“Krabby Patties” from the show) and earning 15 points for each burger he ate. The messaging and modeling of eating hot dogs and hamburgers run counter to efforts to curb childhood obesity.



Nickelodeon does not require that the foods advertised on its network meet any particular nutrition guidelines. Nor does Nickelodeon belong to the Council of Better Business Bureaus’ CFBAI. As a result, companies such as Topps (which markets Ring Pops and

Baby Bottle Pops) and Chuck E. Cheese's are able to advertise their unhealthy products on Nickelodeon. In contrast, the Walt Disney Company and ION Television's Qubo have comprehensive policies that apply nutrition standards to all their marketing and advertising to children.

Although Nickelodeon prides itself on social responsibility, it lags behind other children's entertainment networks. One-third of children are overweight or obese, yet Nickelodeon continues to refuse to take responsibility to ensure that its advertising does not harm children's diets and health. Parents bear the ultimate responsibility for feeding their children, but Nickelodeon should not promote obesity or foster conflict between children and parents by marketing unhealthy food to children.

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<sup>1</sup> Institute of Medicine. *Food Marketing to Children: Threat or Opportunity?* Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Harris JL, Vishnudas S, Schwartz MB, Brownell KD. "Redefining 'Child-Directed Advertising' to Reduce Unhealthy Television Food Advertising." *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, 2013, vol. 44, pp. 358-364.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cspinet.org/marketingguidelines.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Nickelodeon also aired advertisements for baby/toddler food and cooking oils, presumably geared to parents.

<sup>5</sup> We analyzed restaurant ads that featured a single menu offering by evaluating the nutritional quality of that offering. Where ads were for the full kids' menu or the restaurant in general, we assessed whether the majority of the items on the children's menu met nutrition standards.