The Center for Science in the Public Interest’s new report, “Sugar Overload: Retail Checkout Promotes Obesity,” examines the prevalence and healthfulness of foods and beverages at checkout. We found that food and beverages are frequently marketed at checkout and are usually unhealthy. The majority of food and beverage checkout offerings are candy, gum, energy bars, chips, cookies, soda, and other sugar drinks. Unhealthy items are promoted via checkout at a wide variety of stores, including non-food stores, such as hardware, bed and bath, toy, and drug stores.

When most people think of marketing, they think about advertising and promotions. However, price, place, and product are also key ways that companies market food. Displaying food at checkout is a powerful form of marketing that induces people to purchase foods and beverages that they otherwise might not. A growing body of evidence shows that food availability has a strong influence on what and how much people eat. The widespread accessibility of snack foods is a contributor to the obesity epidemic. Few Americans can afford to be consuming the extra calories marketed to them at checkout, especially since these calories are usually of poor nutritional quality.

We conducted a field study of checkout aisles in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area in 30 retail stores across 14 store types, from grocery and convenience stores to hardware, toy, and electronic stores. We assessed the presence and type of food, beverages, and non-food merchandise at each checkout.

Food and beverages at checkout are ubiquitous at a wide variety of retail stores and are unhealthy.
- The vast majority (86%) of non-food stores carry foods, beverages, or both at checkout.
- About half of all store checkout offerings are foods (41%) and beverages (12%) and half (47%) are non-food merchandise.
- The majority of checkout food offerings are unhealthy (90%); 8% of offerings are healthier; and only 2% are healthy. Candy is the most common food offering, followed by gum, energy bars, chips, and cookies.
- The majority (60%) of checkout beverage offerings are soda and other sugar drinks.
- There is little difference among the offerings at various kinds of checkout aisles, including express and family-friendly aisles.
- It is somewhat less likely that self-checkout aisles have food than standard checkout aisles. However, two thirds of the self-checkout aisles we assessed promoted unhealthy food.

Retail stores are prompting people to purchase and consume calories that contribute to obesity and harm their health. Non-food stores should stop selling foods and beverages at checkout. Food stores should not sell unhealthy foods and beverages at checkout. They should adopt nutrition standards that set limits for calories, saturated fats, sugars, and sodium, and ensure that foods include meaningful amounts of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat dairy, or nuts.

For more information, visit www.cspinet.org/sugaroverload.pdf or email nutritionpolicy@cspinet.org.