

Child obesity seen as fueled by Spanish language tv ads

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Spanish-language television is bombarding children with so many fast-food commercials that it may be fueling the rising obesity epidemic among Latino youth, according to research led by pediatricians from the Johns Hopkins Children's Center. Latino children, who make up one-fifth of the U.S. child population, also have the highest obesity and overweight rates of all ethnic groups.

A report on the study, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, was released online ahead of print in the *Journal of Pediatrics*.

“While we cannot blame overweight and obesity solely on TV commercials, there is solid evidence that children exposed to such messages tend to have unhealthy diets and to be overweight,” says study lead investigator Darcy Thompson, M.D., M.P.H., a pediatrician at Hopkins Children's.

Past research among English-speaking children has shown that TV ads influence food preferences, particularly among the more impressionable young viewers.

Researchers reviewed 60 hours of programming airing between 3 p.m. and 9 p.m., heavy viewing hours for school-age children, on Univision and Telemundo, the two largest Spanish-language channels in the United States, reaching 99 percent and 93 percent of U.S. Latino households, respectively. Univision content was recorded from its national network cable in Seattle, and Telemundo content was recorded on a local carrier

in Tucson, Ariz.

Tallying two or three food commercials each hour, the investigators said one-third specifically targeted children. Nearly half of all food commercials featured fast food, and more than half of all drink commercials promoted soda and drinks with high sugar content.

To counter the effects of food commercials, the researchers suggest, young children should be restricted to two hours a day or less of TV viewing and parents should talk to them about healthy diet and food choices. Children younger than 2 should not be allowed to watch any TV, pediatricians advise.

Other recommendations:

- Pediatricians caring for Latino children should be aware of their patients' heavy exposure to food ads and the possible effects.
- Public health officials should urge policy makers to limit food advertising to children, something many European countries are already doing.

Source: Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions

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