

choice



Little bellies, big problems

How parents, industry and government can solve
Australia's childhood obesity crisis.

“If we are serious about tackling childhood obesity we need to remove the barriers that stand in the way of healthy choices.”



Childhood obesity — why all the fuss?

Childhood obesity in Australia has reached critical levels. At least one Australian child in five is overweight or obese. Today's children may be the first generation to die at an earlier age than their parents.

Table 1: Prevalence of overweight and obesity among children

	Prevalence in children in 1995 (Australia)	Prevalence in children in 2004 (NSW only)
Overweight	15.7%	17.9%
Obesity	5.1%	7.0%
Rate of overweight and obesity	1 in 5	1 in 4

Overweight and obesity have serious health and social consequences. Children who are overweight are likely as adults to have an increased risk of high blood pressure and blood cholesterol levels, two factors associated with heart disease. Type 2 diabetes, often called adult onset diabetes because it usually doesn't develop until adulthood, is now appearing in children and adolescents.

Short-term health problems associated with childhood obesity include orthopaedic problems such as back pain and flat feet, respiratory conditions such as asthma and sleep apnoea, and psychosocial impacts such as poor self-esteem, depression and learning difficulties.

Longer-term health impacts of overweight and obesity include cardiovascular disease, Type 2 diabetes, stroke, cancers, osteoarthritis and kidney and gall bladder disease.

Overweight and obesity affect about 9 million Australian adults and a further 1.5 million children. Associated illnesses place an enormous burden on our health system and society in general. The total cost of obesity is estimated to be as high as \$1.3 billion each year.

For most people, being overweight is avoidable. Poor eating habits coupled with a sedentary lifestyle over a prolonged period lead to weight gain.

Overweight children are more likely to become overweight adults. Bad childhood eating habits are difficult to break so it's vital that children get a nutritious start in life.

We need bold strategies to combat the increasing childhood obesity problem. We need to help parents help their children. It is not enough just to encourage parents to make healthy choices. If we are serious about tackling childhood obesity we need to remove the barriers that stand in the way of healthy choices.

Exercise is an important part of the obesity equation. But, by itself, exercise is not enough. Unlike strategies that encourage kids to be more active, strategies that affect the food and advertising industries' bottom line are met with concerted resistance. Necessary changes to the food that kids eat and the way it is marketed are more difficult for government and the community to achieve.

About 20-25% of Australian children are overweight or obese.

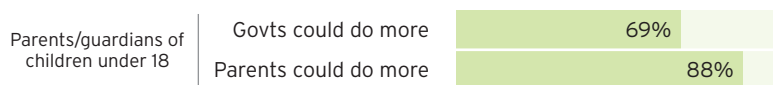
82% of people wanted governments to regulate food marketing to kids.

What consumers say — our research

A May 2006 Newspoll survey commissioned by CHOICE asked 1200 consumers about their attitudes to childhood obesity. A third of the participants (393) were parents or legal guardians of at least one child under the age of 18.

Most parents (88%) said that parents themselves could be doing more to help overcome the problem, while 69% said governments could do more.

Figure 1: In general, do you think parents/governments could be doing more to prevent children becoming overweight?



The survey also investigated attitudes towards three potential government initiatives, revealing overwhelming support for government action in all cases.

- 82% wanted government to regulate the way food and drinks are advertised and marketed to children.
- 80% were in favour of educating parents and children to develop healthy eating habits.
- 83% wanted the government to require manufacturers to make children's foods healthier.

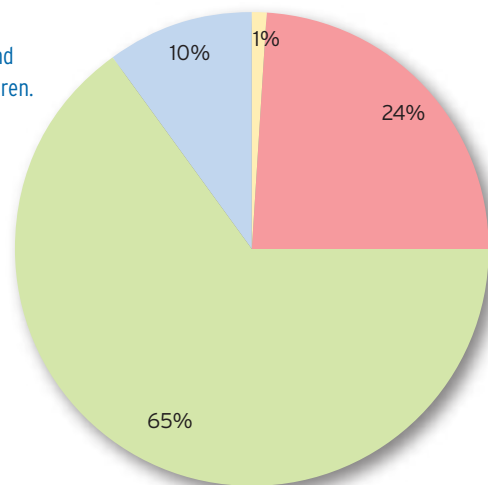
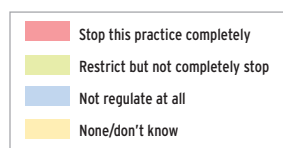
Figure 2: Some people have suggested things governments could do to help reduce the number of overweight children. Please tell me if you are in favour of or against ...



When asked about advertising unhealthy foods and drinks during popular children's TV programs:

- 24% supported government action to stop the practice completely.
- 65% thought government should restrict the practice but not stop it completely.
- 10% said the practice should not be regulated by government at all.

Figure 3: Companies can advertise unhealthy foods and drinks during TV programs that are popular with children. Do you think governments should ...?

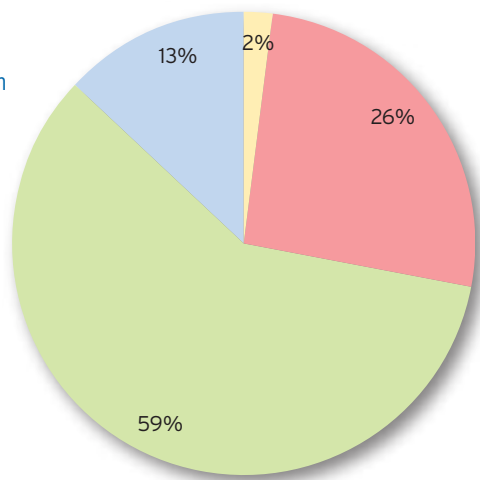
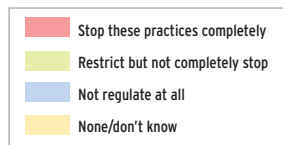


83% of people wanted governments to require manufacturers to make kids' food healthier.

Consumers were also asked about the use of cartoon characters, popular media personalities and toys to market unhealthy foods to children.

- 26% wanted government to stop these practices completely.
- 59% thought government should restrict these practices but not stop them completely.
- 13% said these practices should not be regulated by government at all.

Figure 4: Sometimes food and drink companies can market unhealthy products to children by using cartoon characters, popular media personalities or toys. Do you think governments should ...?



Source for Figures 1-4: Choice/Newspoll. Based on telephone interviews with 1200 respondents aged 18 years and over, conducted nationally on 5-7 May, 2006.

Figure 1: Sample size = 393.

Parents understand that they need to do more to prevent children becoming overweight. But they can't do it alone. Our research shows that consumers think government should step in.

Education alone isn't enough to prevent children becoming overweight. Australians also want governments to tackle two of the most controversial barriers that currently make it difficult for parents to ensure kids eat a healthy diet — the nutritional content of kids' food and the way food is marketed to children.



69% of people thought governments could do more to prevent childhood obesity.

Who's responsible?

The debate about who or what is responsible for Australia's obesity epidemic has raged for many years among politicians, health professionals, academics, industry and the community. Is it over-eating or lack of exercise? Is food marketing really to blame or should parents learn to say 'no'? Is it a matter of personal responsibility or should governments be doing more? And all the while Australian kids have been getting fatter.

The causes of obesity are many and complex. In order to reduce our rate of childhood obesity we must all take responsibility: governments, the food and advertising industries, health professionals and schools as well as parents and individual consumers.

To date, much of the focus has been on encouraging individuals to eat a healthy diet and exercise regularly. Much of the onus for ensuring children maintain a healthy weight has been placed on parents. But rates of obesity are steadily increasing — it is evident that this strategy alone is not working.

Parents are ultimately responsible for what their kids eat and drink at home and at school. Children also learn healthy, or unhealthy, eating and lifestyle habits from their parents. Unhealthy eating habits developed in childhood can be hard to break.

But parents can only do so much. We live in an environment that makes their job harder. Parents are busier and have less time to prepare meals; many rely on convenience foods to fill kids' stomachs. Children spend more time watching TV, surfing the internet or playing computer games. There is an abundance of kilojoule-laden snacks and fast food meals that are convenient for parents and appealing to kids. On top of this there is the relentless promotion of unhealthy foods to kids through TV, internet and other media.

It's little wonder that many parents find it hard to resist 'pester power'. Ensuring kids have a healthy diet is just another battle for today's busy parent.

Our survey results show that the vast majority (88%) of parents agree they can do more to prevent children becoming overweight.

But parents need help — 69% wanted government to do more to prevent children becoming overweight.

Action 1: Effective health promotion and healthy eating education programs for parents and children.

Commonwealth, State and Territory governments should invest in education strategies to promote healthy eating messages to parents and children. Independent research should be conducted to help determine the most effective way of conveying these messages.

Kids' food falls short of the mark

If kids take in more energy (kilojoules) than they use up in play, sport and general day-to-day activity, then they are likely to put on weight.

Government advice on healthy eating hasn't changed much over the years. Eat a balanced diet of wholegrain cereals, fresh fruit and vegetables, lean meats and fish, and dairy products. Don't eat too many fatty, salty or sugary foods. Highly processed convenience foods should be considered treats rather than everyday foods.

Parents rely on prepackaged snacks and take away foods because so many meals are eaten away from home. But it's not always easy for parents to tell the healthy foods from the unhealthy.

A 2005 CHOICE survey found only 25% of kids' snacks were healthy enough to include in lunchboxes every day. Many snacks had too much sugar, saturated fat, kilojoules and/or salt.

Individually packaged portions make life easier for parents but the novelty factor is more likely to appeal to kids — teddy bear shaped biscuits, crackers to dip in peanut butter, yoghurt from a tube, and prepacked lunchboxes of crackers, cheese, processed meats and chocolate.

Even some fruit-based snacks aren't as healthy as they seem. For example, products such as fruit straps may claim to be made from real fruit but they can be so highly processed that they are a poor substitute for the real thing. In September 2006, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission told Uncle Tobys not to market their Roll-Ups products as "made from 65% real fruit", nor to imply that they have undergone minimal processing. Claiming that they are made from 65% real fruit might have led parents to believe that Roll-Ups are a suitable kids' snack. In reality, they're a concentrated form of sugar that sticks to kids' teeth and contributes to tooth decay.

Kids also get a raw deal when it comes to breakfast cereals. Breakfast should give kids a healthy start to the day, providing them with the energy and nutrients they need to help them grow, play and learn. A nutritious breakfast cereal is full of wholegrain

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Only 25% of kids' snacks met our nutrition criteria for healthy everyday eating.

Action 2: Food manufacturers and fast food outlets to reduce the fat, sugar, kilojoules and salt content of kids' food.

If manufacturers fail to improve the nutrition content of kids' foods in a meaningful way, the government should be prepared to take action.

Action 3: Better alignment of the Commonwealth Government's anti-obesity strategies with food regulation.

Food regulatory decisions should not undermine strategies to reduce obesity. For example, the addition of vitamins and minerals to sugary soft drinks undermines healthy eating messages about the role of soft drinks in a balanced diet. It may suggest that soft drinks are an appropriate source of vitamins and minerals. Parents may allow children to consume more soft drink because of its perceived benefits, yet the high sugar content could contribute to weight gain.

Most kids' breakfast cereals are fibre-flimsy and contain too much sugar or salt.



cereals, which provide a good source of fibre, and not high in sugar or salt. But many kids' cereals are so highly processed they no longer resemble the initial wholesome grain. Most are fibre-flimsy and contain too much sugar or salt. More than half of the children's cereals surveyed by CHOICE in 2005 contained more than 27% sugar; half of those contained more than 40% sugar.

Food manufacturers would have us believe that there are no bad foods, just bad diets. It is true that any food can be included in a healthy diet, but it doesn't help parents make healthy choices when so many kids' foods on the market are those that kids should be eating less often. Manufacturers should reduce the amount of fat, sugar and salt in convenience foods to limit the damage in the long run.

Food marketing influences children

Children are bombarded with ads for fast food restaurants, chocolate, confectionary and other unhealthy foods. Studies confirm what many parents already know: food advertising influences children's food preferences and choices. Food companies know it too — they spend millions of dollars on advertising each year.

A recent study found 81% of food ads between 7 am and 9 pm were for unhealthy foods. Current regulation does not protect children from being bombarded with ads for junk food. The Commonwealth Government's Children's Television Standards place

Action 4: A consistent nutrition labelling scheme to help consumers make healthy choices.

Individual manufacturers have recently introduced their own nutrition labelling initiatives. The danger is the resulting plethora of conflicting labels can confuse and frustrate consumers. Governments should invest in independent research to determine the most effective way to convey nutrition information on food labels and require a consistent approach across the food industry.

Action 5: Active enforcement of the new nutrition, health and related claims standard.

Manufacturers use claims about the health and nutritional benefits of foods to influence parents. The claims invariably focus on positive qualities, such as added vitamins and minerals, without mentioning negative attributes, such as high fat or sugar content. The new standard for nutrition and health claims scheduled for implementation in 2007 goes part of the way to addressing this issue, however, we will need proactive enforcement of the new standard to prevent claims that are misleading or unsubstantiated.

A recent study found 81% of food ads between 7am and 9pm promoted unhealthy foods.

some limits on how products can be advertised, but only during children's programs. Beyond this, regulation of food and beverage marketing to kids is largely left to the advertising industry.

Food advertising on TV has been the subject of much public debate. We are also concerned about insidious forms of marketing on the internet and through promotions on products.

Just under 70% of households with children under 15 have internet access. Food companies see the internet as a new way to promote their brands to media-savvy children. Food manufacturers use interactive games, e-cards, viral marketing and kids' clubs to entice children to their kids-only web pages and keep them coming back, all the while creating brand awareness and the desire for particular products.

Promotions on food labels and in supermarkets and fast food outlets also make life harder for parents. Competitions, giveaways, and collectibles create incentives for kids to pester their parents to buy a particular product, as they want to win a prize or collect an entire set of toys. Children's cartoon characters, popular media personalities and sporting heroes are also used to promote foods to kids.

Action 6: Stronger government regulation of food marketing to children.

CHOICE wants the regulation of food marketing to:

- *extend provisions to PG rated programs such as cartoons, soap operas and reality TV programs as they are also popular with children,*
- *limit TV advertisements for unhealthy food aired before 9pm, and*
- *cover online marketing techniques used to promote foods and brands to children.*

The regulations should:

- *address the dominance of ads for unhealthy foods compared to healthy foods,*
- *require balanced nutritional disclosure in marketing of kids' food, rather than focusing only on positive attributes and ignoring negative attributes,*
- *prohibit the use of promotions (such as competitions and giveaways) on packages of unhealthy foods, and*
- *prohibit the use of children's characters and sports and media personalities to promote unhealthy foods.*

Action 7: A single contact point for complaints about food ads.

The current complaints system is complex. Complaints may be directed to television networks, the Australian Communications and Media Authority and/or the Advertising Standards Board, depending on the nature of the complaint. Consumers shouldn't need a detailed understanding of advertising regulation and codes of practice to make a complaint.

A call to action to combat childhood obesity

- Action 1:** Effective health promotion and healthy eating education programs for parents and children.
- Action 2:** Food manufacturers and fast food outlets to reduce the fat, sugar, kilojoules and salt content of kids' food.
- Action 3:** Better alignment of the Commonwealth Government's anti-obesity strategies with food regulation.
- Action 4:** A consistent nutrition labelling scheme to help consumers make healthy choices.
- Action 5:** Active enforcement of the new nutrition, health and related claims standard.
- Action 6:** Stronger government regulation of food marketing to children.
- Action 7:** A single contact point for complaints about food ads.

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