International Code on Junk Food Marketing FAQ

Saturday 15 March 2008 is World Consumer Rights Day. This years theme is 'Junk Food Generation' and highlights a global campaign to end junk food marketing to children. CHOICE joined forces with Consumers International to launch a new international code on the marketing of food and drinks to kids.

1. What is the International Code on Marketing of Food to Children?

Consumers International and the International Obesity Taskforce are calling on the World Health Organization (WHO) to adopt a global model code that would restrict all types of marketing of energy dense, nutrient poor foods that are high in fat, sugar or salt targeting children under 16 years old.

This would mean:

- A ban on radio or TV advertisements promoting unhealthy foods between 06.00 and 21.00
- No marketing of unhealthy foods using new media (such as websites, social networking sites, viral marketing and SMS)
- No promotion of unhealthy foods in schools
- No inclusion of free gifts, toys or collectible items with appeal to children to promote unhealthy foods
- No use of celebrities, cartoon characters, competitions or free gifts to market unhealthy foods.

2. How would the Code work?

Once member governments of the WHO agree to adopt the Code, it would be up to those national governments to implement it through legislation. Food and beverage companies would be expected to adapt their own internal policies as a result of the Code. This would also include the marketing and advertising industries as well. However the aim of the Code is to implement effective national regulation, not to establish another self-regulatory industry scheme.

3. What type of food products would be affected by the marketing ban?

The aim of this Code is to tackle obesity and other diet-related diseases and therefore it is only unhealthy (high in fat, sugar and salt) food and drinks that we would want to stop being marketed to children. Companies would be able to reformulate their products and market healthier products to children.

We believe that the World Health Organization should define the nutritional criteria to determine which food products would be banned from being advertised to children, based on its existing global dietary recommendations.

4. Would birthday cakes and festive treats be banned?

We recognise that a very small number of food products are produced especially for one off occasions such as birthdays and religious festivals and these are therefore not included in the code. Our real concern is unhealthy food that is eaten frequently and contributes to obesity and the risk of other diet-related diseases.

5. What about future forms of advertising?

It is impossible to define all forms of marketing that might appear in the future. We would expect national governments and the WHO to constantly review what forms of advertising need regulating. The Code covers all forms of marketing – direct and indirect.

6. How was the CI/IOTF model code put together?

Consumers International consulted its global membership with three formal consultations. The International Obesity Taskforce also consulted its members who include respected academics and clinicians. Wherever possible we have drawn on the experience of relevant documents such as regulations already in existence.

7. Why are CI and the IOTF launching the Code now?

We are using the opportunity of World Consumer Rights Day, which takes place every year on 15 March to highlight one of the most important issues for consumers today – the childhood obesity crisis and the role played by multinational companies in marketing unhealthy food to children. (Proposals take account of the IOTF's Sydney Principles, developed with the aim of achieving a substantial level of protection for children against the commercial promotion of foods and beverages.)

The timing is important because later this year in May 2008 the WHO will again debate this issue as a revised action plan on the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases will be presented. We are launching our Code now to build support amongst national governments and other stakeholders to ensure that the action plan includes the need for urgent action on the marketing of food to children.

8. What are WHO currently doing about childhood obesity and other diet-related diseases? Agreement was reached by national governments at the World Health Assembly (WHA) in May 2007 for the WHO to 'develop a set of recommendations on marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children'. Since then the WHO has not consulted publicly on their plans for what these recommendations should look like, we understand that this will take place in early 2009.

The WHO is currently consulting on their overall Draft Action Plan for implementing the global strategy on the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases, which features marketing of food to children. This will be presented to the next WHA meeting in May 2008.

9. What is wrong with the existing policies or self-regulation that food companies operate? An international standard is needed because although many multinational food companies promote the same products all over the world, different national governments have different policies, which leads to inconsistencies and gaps for companies to exploit.

Many of the voluntary agreements made up by companies themselves, not only do not go far enough, but often only apply to Europe or the US and Canada. Furthermore, these voluntary agreements only apply to marketing directed at children under 12 years of age. Our Code demands that restrictions apply to all children under 16.

We believe that all children need the same level of protection in all countries.

Consumers International (CI) is the global federation of consumer organisations with over 220 member organisations in 115 countries from all regions of the world. These proposals are based on a global consultation of CI's membership. The International Obesity Task Force (IOTF) is the policy section of the International Association for the Study of Obesity, which has over 10,000 members in more than 50 country and regional associations around the world.