### Food Advertising to Children:

# Who's the Biggest Loser?

on inside the world of TV food advertising, and how we can fix it.

**What's** 

really going







#### Food advertising to children: what's the big deal?

Childhood obesity is a growing concern, not only in Australia but throughout the world<sup>1</sup>. One in four Australian children is estimated to be overweight or obese<sup>2</sup>.

Overweight and obesity have serious health consequences. Overweight children are more likely to become overweight adults. Overweight and obesity are associated with increased risk of heart disease, Type 2 diabetes, arthritis, stroke, kidney disease and some cancers<sup>3</sup>; placing an enormous burden on our health system and society in general. The total cost of obesity in Australia in 2008 was as high as \$58 billion per year<sup>4</sup>.

There are many factors that lead to overweight and obesity — the nutritional quality and amount of food we eat; how active we are; the environment where we live, work, eat, learn and play<sup>5</sup>. We need to take action on many fronts to stem and reverse the rising rates of overweight and obesity among Australia adults and children.

Preventative health programs — when designed and implemented well — make an enormous contribution to improving health and well-being. We've already seen preventative health strategies work in areas such as tobacco control, drink driving and skin cancer.

Intervening early not only delivers health benefits by preventing chronic diseases before they develop, it also makes good economic sense<sup>6</sup>.

Food habits — good and bad — develop during childhood so it's important that children learn to make healthy choices while they're young. Children's food choices are influenced by what's available at home and at school, the attitudes and eating habits of their parents, families, teachers and friends; and the way foods are labelled and promoted<sup>7</sup>.

Health experts and parents alike know that food advertising influences children's food preferences, food choices and the products they pester their parents to buy<sup>8,9,10</sup>. The World Health Organisation recommended restrictions on food marketing to children as part of a global strategy to prevent the growing burden of lifestyle and diet-related diseases because "food advertising affects food choices and influences dietary habits" 10.

And with around US\$13 billion spent each year by the food industry marketing products throughout the world<sup>11</sup>, if advertising doesn't work then it's a colossal waste of money.



#### Junk food advertising: the real story

#### **About this report**

In this report we present research which shows that children continue to be exposed to a high volume of junk food ads during the periods and programs that they watch most. Rather than banning all food advertising as some have proposed, or doing nothing as others want, CHOICE thinks there is a middle ground. The objective and scientifically rigorous nutrient profiling system, developed by the Australian food regulator, can and should be used to restrict junk food marketing to children.

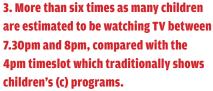
We use TV ads to illustrate this point vet we know that there is much more to food marketing than what children see on TV. In the supermarket, at the movies, in magazines or online – games, toys, celebrities and popular cartoon characters are used to promote an array of sugary and high-fat snacks. The nutrient profiling system could also be used to regulate the many other techniques used to appeal to children.

#### 1. The TV programs and periods watched most by children also feature the greatest number of junk food ads.

More children watch TV between 6pm and 9pm than during designated children's viewing times and children's (c) programs. The number of all food ads and junk food ads increases between 6pm and 9pm. Reality TV programs such as So You Think You Can Dance, comedies like The Simpsons, and family movies were most popular with children and featured the most junk food ads.

#### 2. The majority of food ads (54%) aired between 6am and 9pm fail the healthy food test and should not be marketed to children.

When advertised foods were assessed using the nutrient profiling scoring criteria developed by Food Standards Australia New Zealand, 54% of food ads failed because they featured unhealthy foods such as fast food, confectionery and sugary cereals. More than half of those ads that failed might pass if the nutrition content of unhealthy products was modified or those products were removed from the ad altogether.



#### 4. Current regulations and voluntary industry initiatives fail to protect children from the glut of junk food ads that appear during the programs that they watch most.

Current standards and codes only apply during programs that are aimed at children under 12 or periods where the viewing audience is predominantly children of this age.

#### 5. Nutrient profiling levels the playing field because it:

- creates an incentive for food manufacturers to make products healthier;
- encourages manufacturers to more prominently promote their healthier products;
- is an objective tool that can be used to cut the glut of junk food ads that reach Australian children; and
- is already being used in the UK to regulate food advertising to children.

Food Standards Australia New Zealand has developed nutrient profiling criteria which judges individual products as healthy or unhealthy, based on their kilojoule, saturated fat, sodium, sugars, fibre and fruit and vegetable content. The system was originally developed by the UK Food Standards Agency as the basis for regulating junk food advertising to children.



#### Government or industry: who's in charge?

In a week of Australian TV viewing how many food ads were shown between 6am and 9pm?

A. 586 B. 2,200 C. 3.450

(see p3 for answer)

V food advertising to children is subject to a combination of government regulation, advertising industry codes and voluntary food industry initiatives.

Some provisions of the Children's Television Standards maintained by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) apply to food advertisements. Marketing codes developed by industry groups such as the Australian Association of National Advertisers, Free TV Australia, and the Australian Subscription Television and Radio Association also include provisions on food marketing to children.

And the Australian Food and Grocery Council (AFGC) recently developed a Responsible Children's Marketing Initiative, encouraging members to develop their own action plans. Coca Cola, Pepsico, Mars, Nestle, Kraft and Cadbury are among the first to publish their responsible children's marketing action plans.

While this looks like a suitable range of regulation, most of these requirements are developed and 'enforced' by the food and advertising industries. In practice, these codes and standards do not limit the volume of junk food ads that may be aired when children are watching TV. They only apply during children's c-classified programs and periods, and in the case of the food industry codes, only during programs directed primarily at children under 12. They also leave it to manufacturers to establish their own nutrition criteria to determine which foods can be promoted to children.

Yet six times as many children watch TV in the early evening when their favourite comedies (e.g. *The Simpsons*) and reality TV shows (e.g. *So You Think You Can Dance*) are aired, compared with the 4pm timeslot when designated children's programs are on air<sup>12</sup>. Even though there are a greater number of children watching comedies and reality TV, there

are no restrictions on which foods can be marketed during these shows because the large number of adults who are also watching mean children still make up the minority of the audience. Some of these shows are even sponsored by fast food companies and confectionery manufacturers. If food advertising restrictions continue to apply only when children make up a substantial proportion of the viewing audience they will have limited impact because they do not apply when the greatest number of children are watching TV.

So while the food and advertising industries look like they're responding to calls to stop marketing unhealthy foods to children, it seems that they're not prepared to stop marketing to children where they also lose the opportunity to promote their products to adults. Nor can we expect food manufacturers to voluntarily limit their advertising of unhealthy foods to children, if they risk losing market share to less socially responsible competitors. Their first job is to sell products, not to protect children. That's why governments need to level the playing field.

One government already has, and it seems to be working. In 2007, the UK communications regulator Ofcom introduced new restrictions on ads for foods and drinks that are high in fat, sugar or salt. Foods are assessed using a nutrient profiling model developed by the UK Food Standards Agency. Only those that meet the nutrient criteria may be advertised during programs aimed at children 4-15 years or with a 'disproportionately high' child audience. Ofcom estimates that children were now seeing 35% fewer junk food ads overall, including 29% fewer junk food ads between 6pm and 9pm<sup>13</sup>. ACMA has failed to explore the introduction of a similar system in Australia.

#### **CHOICE's** research: what we did

HOICE looked at all the food and beverage ads aired on free-to-air TV channels Seven, Nine and Ten in Sydney between 6am and 9pm, during a one week period from Sunday 13 April 2008 to Saturday 19 April 2008\*.

Data on all food ads aired during the study period was purchased from AC Neilson. There were a total of 14,444 ads aired during the study week. 2,200 (15%) of these ads were for food. Of all the food ads 1,408 (64%) were aired during the study period of 6am to 9pm.

Each ad was viewed to determine which products were promoted. Each advertised product was assessed using the nutrient profiling scoring criteria developed by our food regulator Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ)14. The criteria assess how healthy a food or drink is, based on the amount of kilojoules, saturated fat, sugar, sodium, dietary fibre, protein, fruit and vegetables it contains per 100g or 100ml.

Based on the nutritional profile, a product either passes or fails the criteria. Under a proposed FSANZ food labelling scheme, only products that pass will be eligible to carry a marketing claim about the health benefits of that food. For instance, a sugary breakfast cereal could not claim to prevent heart disease.

Yet, these criteria are based on a system developed by the UK food regulator to restrict junk food advertising on TV. The FSANZ criteria could be used in a similar way to reduce the number of junk food ads on Australian TV.

For the purposes of this study, any product that passed the criteria was considered 'healthy food'. Advertisements that featured 'healthy foods' only were considered to pass, and therefore are suitable for advertising to children. Any product that failed the criteria was considered 'junk food'. Any ad featuring a 'junk food' was considered to fail and should not be advertised to children. Ads that featured both 'junk foods' and 'healthy foods' were also considered to fail but it was noted that these ads may pass if the ad (or the food) was modified.

CHOICE also looked at the TV channels, programs and periods that had the greatest number of total food ads and junk food ads. We looked at which products and brands were advertised most. Additionally, CHOICE obtained OzTAM data on the Top 50 programs viewed by children under 14 during the study period<sup>†</sup>. We then assessed the ads aired during those programs to determine children's exposure to junk food ads during the most popular programs.



\* Note: This week was chosen to coincide with a Consumers International worldwide food marketing project. In Sydney, the study period fell during the school holidays.

† The 0-14 years age bracket was the category collected by OzTAM that was most relevant to this study.

Which channel aired the most junk food ads?

A. Channel Seven **B. Channel Nine** 

**C. Channel Ten** 

(see p 6-7 for answer)

#### What we found: Fast food was advertised the most

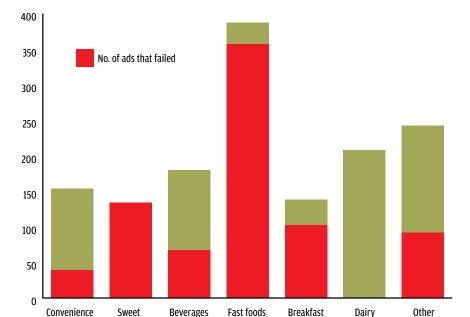
food ads were for fast food. McDonald's and KFC were the most frequent fast food advertisers. All of their ads failed.

#### What we found: Fast food was advertised the most

The most advertised category was fast food (including McDonalds, KFC, Pizza Hut, Subway and Dominos) representing 27% of all food ads. 91% of fast food ads failed the nutrition criteria because they promoted junk foods. The second largest category was dairy products, representing 15% of all food ads. All ads in this category passed.

Other categories frequently promoted were beverages, excluding milk drinks (13%); convenience foods and meals (11%); breakfast cereals (10%); and sweet snacks and confectionery (9%).

Table 1 shows which food brands advertised the most during the study period. Four of the top five brands advertised junk food products and their ads failed the nutrition criteria.



cereals

Figure 1: Number of food ads by category

Table 1: Top 5 most advertised brands

snacks and

confectionery

foods and

meals

(not snacks)

Brand	No. of ads	% of ads that failed	Products
McDonald's	206	100	McCafe range, Bacon Cheeseburger, Quarter pounder with bacon, Crispy chicken range, Brekky snack wrap, Happy meal, Big Mac
Kellogg's	102	100	Sultana bran, Cornflakes, Rice Bubbles, Coco Pops Chex, Crunch Nut Clusters, Nutri-grain
KFC	82	100	Twisters, Snack Box, Family Fun Bucket, Zinger, Chicken range
Woolworths	58	0	Fruit, Vegetables, Specials - Heinz Big 'N' Chunky, Yoplait yoghurt
Cadbury	57	100	Boost, Dairy Milk Family block, Flake

# What we found: most ads

#### What we found: most ads promoted iunk food

Of the total of 1,408 food and beverage ads during the study period, 755 or 54% of these ads failed the nutrition criteria and were classified as 'junk food' ads.

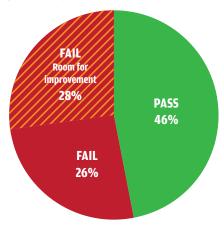
Some of these ads failed despite promoting both healthy products and junk foods. These junk food ads might have passed if the manufacturers altered the nutritional profile of the products to meet the criteria or removed the junk food from the ad and only promoted their healthier products.

For example, an ad for a pedometer giveaway with selected Kellogg's cereals featured Sultana Bran, Rice Bubbles and Cornflakes. Only Sultana Bran passed the nutrition criteria; Rice Bubbles and Cornflakes failed. This ad would have passed if it featured Sultana Bran only, or Sultana Bran and other cereals that met the nutrition criteria.

These types of ads were classified as 'fail — room for improvement'. 28% of all food ads fell into this category, representing 52% of all junk food ads.

An ad for Pitos pita chips showed five different flavours — three flavours passed, two flavours failed. If the sodium and/or saturated fat content was modified, the two failed flavours would have passed, meaning the ad would have passed.

Figure 2: Proportion of food ads that passed and failed the nutrition criteria



If governments mandated that only healthy foods could be advertised, manufacturers and marketers would have a strong incentive to improve the nutritional content of their product and therefore the quality of food available to consumers. This would eliminate many junk food ads and dramatically raise the profile of healthier foods as more ads would be promoting healthy foods.

**66** 54% of all food ads shown were promoted junk food. 52% of junk food ads could pass if they were modified.





#### What we found: Popular TV programs showed more junk food ads

#### What we found: Popular TV programs showed more junk food ads

Table 2 shows that some of the most popular programs featured many junk food ads. So You Think You Can Dance was the most popular program that week, showing a total of 23 junk food ads across two episodes. Junk food ads represented more than 65% of all food ads during this program. An episode of The Simpsons and the Harry Potter movie showed six junk food ads each, representing 60% of all food ads. Reality weight-loss show The Biggest Loser

Table 2: Top 10 programs\* watched by children and the number of junk food ads shown

	Name	Channel	Day	Program duration (mins)	No. of junk food ads	Junk food ads as % of total food ads
1	So You Think You Can Dance Australia	10	Sunday	90	10	67
2	Bondi Rescue	10	Tuesday	30	4	67
3	The Biggest Loser (Aus)	10	Friday	30	1	25
4	The Simpsons (Episode 2)	10	Friday	30	6	75
5	The Simpsons (Episode 1)	10	Friday	30	2	50
6	Gladiators	7	Sunday	30	5	63
7	The Biggest Loser (Aus)	10	Tuesday	30	1	11
8	Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban	9	Saturday	90 <sup>†</sup>	6	60
9	The Biggest Loser (Aus): The weigh in	10	Sunday	60	3	38
10	So You Think You Can Dance Australia: Results	10	Monday	90	13	81

 $<sup>^{\</sup>ast}$  Source – Top 10 Episodes list for Sydney market ranked by audience for people 0-14 years provided by OzTAM (week commencing 13/04/2008–19/04/2008), OzTAM Pty Limited  $^{15}$ .

Table 3: Junk foods advertised during So You Think You Can Dance

Brand	Products promoted	No. of ads
Pringles	Potato crisps, rice crisps	
Cadbury	Boost, Flake, Dairy Milk block	
McDonald's	Bacon Cheeseburger, Big Mac, Crispy Chicken Fillet Deluxe with Bacon, Chicken nuggets, McCafe coffee and cakes	3
Hungry Jacks	Coca Cola, Fries, Bacon Deluxe burger	2
Old El Paso	Hard and soft taco kit	1
Natural Confectionary	Confectionery jellies range	1
Pitos Premium Pita chips	Pita chips range	1
KFC Original Recipe chicken, Popcorn chicken, Crispy chicken strips, chips		1

was also popular with children. *The Biggest Loser* featured fewer junk food ads, suggesting a conscious decision by manufacturers and advertisers to promote healthy product, consistent with the programs healthy eating message.

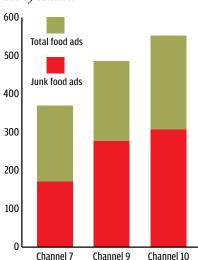
The show with the most junk food ads per half hour was *Friends*. There were 11 junk food ads in one 30-minute episode. Three episodes of *Friends* featured in the top 50 programs watched by children that week (ranking 21st, 27th and 32nd).

#### What we found: Channel Ten was the biggest loser...seriously

Channel Ten showed eight of the Top 10 most popular programs. It also aired the most food ads and the most junk food ads. In the study period, Channel Ten aired 552 food ads, 307 (56%) were for junk foods. Channel Nine showed 486 food ads of which 277 (57%) were for junk food and Channel Seven showed the least with a total of 370 food ads with 171 (46%) promoting junk food.

Channel Ten aired 41% of all junk food ads and Channel Nine had 37%, while Channel Seven had 23% of the junk food ads shown during the study week.

Figure 3: Total food ads and junk food ads by channel



<sup>†</sup> This program commenced at 7.30pm and finished after 9pm. Only those ads aired before 9pm were assessed.

# **What we found:**

#### What we found: Junk food ads peaked when more children were watching

On weekdays and weekends more junk food ads aired during the evening prime time viewing.

On weekdays there were between two and four food ads per half hour during the day time, but from 6-9pm this rose dramatically to an average of 10 junk food ads from 6-6:30pm and between four and seven junk food ads per half hour for the remainder of the evening.

On the weekend the trend was similar but with more ads during mid-late morning (when shows such as Saturday Disney aired) and up to eight ads per half hour from 6-9pm (when children's movies, Australia's Funniest Home Videos and So You Think You Can Dance aired).

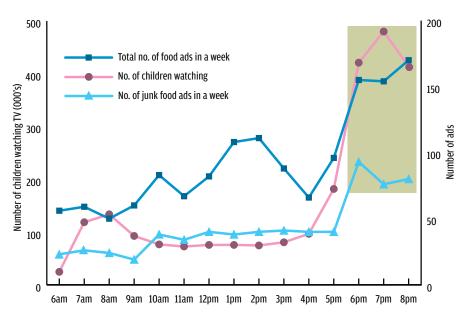
On weekdays, the 8-9pm period had the most food ads with an average of 24 food ads and 10 junk food ads. On average, the 6-7pm period had the most junk food ads with 11 junk food ads out of 22 food ads. The periods with the most junk food ads were Wednesday 7-8pm and Thursday 6-7pm. There were 17 junk food ads during these periods.

Figure 4 shows the trend throughout the day for children aged 0-14 years watching commercial TV each hour (left axis) and the number of food and junk food ads each hour (right axis). This shows that there are more junk food ads at times when more children are watching TV. As the number of children watching TV rises dramatically at 6pm and remains high until 9pm so do the number of food ads and junk food ads that they are potentially exposed to. This coincides with dinner time and an increasing number of viewers, both children and adults.

Table 4: Top 3 advertisers between 6pm and 9pm (Sunday-Saturday)

Company	No. of food ads aired between 6-9pm	% of ads that failed
KFC	58	100
McDonald's	52	100
Kellogg's	19	100

Figure 4: Trends in children's viewing and the food ads



Source for viewing data: Australian Communications and Media Authority<sup>16</sup> It is the average number of 0-14 year old children watching TV, January-June 2006.

## What's the solution?

his study shows that junk food ads continue to make up the majority of food ads on TV. This is consistent with previous studies that have found that the majority of food ads on TV promote unhealthy foods<sup>17,18,19,20</sup>. While other studies have used different criteria for classifying healthy and unhealthy foods, Australian research suggests that ads for unhealthy foods make up between 49–83% of all food ads.

A 2008 Newspoll survey commissioned by CHOICE<sup>9</sup> shows that 88% of parents surveyed said that junk food marketing to children undermines parents' efforts to encourage their children to eat healthy foods. 82% of participants in the same study were in favour of increased government regulation of the way unhealthy food was marketed to children. Our 2006 Newspoll survey<sup>8</sup> showed that 89% of respondents were in favour of restricting advertising of unhealthy foods during TV programs that are popular with children.

Current regulations and voluntary industry initiatives fail to protect children from the glut of junk food ads that appear during the programs that are most popular with children. Food manufacturers will never extend their voluntary restrictions if it limits opportunities to market to adults or provide a market advantage for their less-responsible competitors. We need the government to intervene and introduce restrictions that have a more significant impact on the foods ads to which children are exposed.

Let's create a system that:

- is grounded in evidence about the reality of our current rates of overweight and obesity, the importance of early intervention, the negative influence of junk food advertising and recognition of when the largest volumes of children are watching TV;
- works in the real world applying objective, rigorous and accepted scientific criteria to sort the healthy from the junk food;
- sends our children more balanced healthy eating messages, successfully and fairly eliminating the horde of junk food ads kids see on TV every day, simultaneously lifting the profile of healthier foods;
- **provides incentives for manufacturers** to make their foods healthier; and
- levels the playing field between commercial competitors so that the more responsible food manufacturers are not penalised for voluntarily adopting ethical advertising practices that genuinely change what foods they promote to children.

This study applies nutrient profiling to TV advertisements only. It could also be used to restrict junk food advertising in other media such as radio, food company websites, children's magazines and even billboards outside schools. Nutrient profiling could also be used

to prevent movie characters and competitions being used to promote unhealthy food to children.

Finally, because food marketing by global brands transcends national borders, the Australian Government needs to be part of a global leadership effort to curb junk food marketing to children

There is currently a draft code before the World Health Assembly on the Marketing of Food and Non-Alcoholic Beverages to Children, developed by Consumers International and International Obesity Taskforce. CHOICE supports this Code as it effectively extends the recommendations of this report.

By endorsing this Code, the Australian Government will help to create a more consistent set of rules for companies across different national markets, discouraging business from easily exploiting opportunities to target children in under-regulated countries.



#### References

- 1 Lobstein, T. and Dibb, S. (2005), Evidence of a Possible Link between Obesogenic Food Advertising and Child Overweight, Obesity Reviews, 6, pp203-208.
- 2 The Australian and New Zealand Obesity Society. Obesity in Australian Children. http:// www.asso.org.au/freestyler/gui/files//factsheet\_ children\_prevalence.pdf. Accessed 3/3/09.
- 3 National Obesity Taskforce (2003). Healthy Weight 2008: The national action agenda for children and young people and their families. Canberra, Department of Health and Ageing.
- 4 Access Economics. (2008), The growing cost of obesity in 2008: three years on. Report by Access Economics Pty Limited to Diabetes Australia.
- 5 World Health Organisation. (2003), Diet, nutrition and the prevention of chronic diseases. World Health Organisation, Geneva.
- 6 National Preventative Health Taskforce. (2008), Australia - The healthiest country by 2020. A discussion paper prepared by the National Preventative Health Taskforce. Commonwealth of
- 7 National Preventative Health Taskforce. (2008), Technical Report 1 — Obesity in Australia: a need for urgent action. Prepared for the National Preventative Health Taskforce by the Obesity Working Group. Commonwealth of Australia.
- 8 CHOICE. (2006), Childhood Obesity Research — CHOICE/Newspoll Survey. CHOICE.
- 9 CHOICE. (2008), Food marketing to children — CHOICE/Newspoll Survey. CHOICE.
- 10 World Health Organisation. (2003), Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health. World Health Organisation, Geneva.
- 11 The Ad Age Group. (2007), Advertising Age's 21st Annual Global Marketers — Part 1: Global ad spending by marketer, The Ad Age Group.
- 12 Australian Communications and Media Authority. (2008), Appendix B: Selected OzTAM ratings data, Children's Television Standards -Report for the Review. http://www.acma.gov.au/ webwr/\_assets/main/lib310132/app\_b-oztam\_ data.pdf, accessed 19/2/2009.
- 13 Ofcom Office of Communications. (2008), Changes in the nature and balance of television food advertising to children: A review of HFSS advertising restrictions. http://www.ofcom.org. uk/research/tv/reports/hfssdec08/hfssdec08.pdf, accessed 19/2/09.

- 14 Food Standards Australia New Zealand. (2007), Attachment 7: Calculation method for determining foods eligible to make health claims — Nutrient Profiling Calculator, *Preliminary Final* Assessment Report Proposal p293 — Nutrition, Health and Related Claims, Food Standards Australia New Zealand.
- 15 OzTAM. (2009), Audience Measure for Top 50 Episodes in Sydney market ranked by People 0-14 Audience by week commencing 13/04/2008-19/04/2008, OzTAM Pty Limited.
- 16 Australian Communications and Media Authority. (2007), Children's Viewing Patterns on Commercial, Free-to-air and Subscription Television: Report analysing audience and ratings data for 2001, 2005 and 2006. p24 Commonwealth of Australia.
- 17 Lobstein, T. and Dibb, S. (2005), Evidence of a Possible Link between Obesogenic Food Advertising and Child Overweight, Obesity Reviews, 6, pp203-208.
- 18 Neville, L; Thomas, M; and Bauman, A. (2005), Food Advertising on Australian Television: The Extent of Children's Exposure, Health Promotion International, 20, pp105-112.
- 19 Kelly, B; Smith, B; King, L; Flood, V; and Bauman, A. (2007), Food Advertising to Children: The Extent and Nature of Exposure. Public Health Nutrition, 10(11), pp1234–1240.
- 20 Chapman, K.; Nicholas, P.; and Supramaniam, R. (2006), How Much Food Advertising is there on Australian Television? Health Promotion International 21(3), pp172-180.



Copyright CHOICE March 2009. For more information about CHOICE campaigns, subscribe to CHOICE Campaigns Update by visiting **www.choice.com.au/ccu**.

CHOICE is an independent, not-for-profit, non-party-political organisation established in 1959. CHOICE works to improve the lives of consumers by taking on issues that matter to them. Through our products and services such as CHOICE Online and CHOICE Magazine we arm consumers with the information to make confident choices, and we campaign for change where markets or regulation are failing.



#### CHOICE

ACN 000 281 925 ABN 72 000 281 925
57 Carrington Road Marrickville NSW 2204
Telephone 02 9577 3399 Subscriptions 1800 069 552 Fax 02 9577 3377
Email campaigns@choice.com.au
www.choice.com.au/campaigns