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Despite industry promises, Yale study finds unprecedented marketing of sugary drinks to youth

New Haven, Conn. – Young people are being exposed to a massive amount of marketing for sugary drinks, such as full-calorie soda, sports drinks, energy drinks, and fruit drinks, according to a new study from the Yale Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity. The study is the most comprehensive and science-based assessment of sugary drink nutrition and marketing ever conducted. The data show that companies marketing sugary drinks target young people, especially black and Hispanic youth. Researchers from the Rudd Center will present detailed findings of the study on October 31 during the American Public Health Association’s Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C.

The report’s authors studied marketing by 14 beverage companies and examined the nutritional quality of nearly 600 products including full-calorie soda, energy drinks, fruit drinks, flavored water, sports drinks, and iced teas, as well as diet energy drinks and diet children’s fruit drinks.

“Beverage companies have pledged to improve child-directed advertising,” said lead researcher Jennifer Harris, director of marketing initiatives at the Rudd Center. “But we are not seeing a true decrease in marketing exposure. Instead companies have shifted from traditional media to newer forms that engage youth through rewards for purchasing sugary drinks, community events, cause-related marketing, promotions, product placements, social media, and smartphones.”

Key study findings include:

Many fruit drinks and energy drinks have as much added sugar and calories as full-calorie soda:

- An 8-ounce serving of a full-calorie fruit drink has 110 calories and 7 teaspoons of sugar – the same amount found in an 8-ounce serving of a full-calorie soda or energy drink.
- Children ages 4 to 8 should consume no more than 15 grams of added sugar per day, according to ChooseMyPlate.gov and the American Heart Association. Given that there are at least 15 grams of sugar per serving in two-thirds of the drinks marketed to children, these drinks contribute to excess sugar consumption. Even 6-ounce child-sized drink pouches like Capri Sun Originals have about 14 grams of added sugar.
- Forty percent of children’s fruit drinks contain artificial sweeteners.
- More than half of sugary drinks and energy drinks display nutrient-related claims on their packages, and 64 percent feature their “all-natural” or “real” ingredients. For example, Cherry 7 Up Antioxidant highlights it is “low sodium,” and labels on Kool-Aid powders promote that they have “25% fewer calories than the leading beverage.”

Energy drinks are inappropriate for children and teens, yet they are heavily marketed to them:

- The American Academy of Pediatrics says that highly caffeinated energy drinks “have no place in the diet of children and adolescents.” Despite this medical advice, the companies clearly target teens.

- In 2010, teens saw 18 percent more TV ads and heard 46 percent more radio ads for energy drinks than adults did. Teens also saw 20 percent more TV ads for energy drinks in 2010 than they saw in 2008.
- Parents have no way to monitor caffeine in drinks because caffeine content is not required – and is often not listed – on product packages.

Despite industry promises to stop marketing unhealthy beverages to children:

- From 2008 to 2010, children’s and teens’ exposure to full-calorie soda TV ads doubled.
- This increase was driven by Coca-Cola and Dr Pepper Snapple Group. Children were exposed to 22 percent fewer ads for PepsiCo sugary drink products.

Companies are targeting black and Hispanic children and teens:

- Black children and teens saw 80 percent to 90 percent more ads compared with white youth, including more than twice as many for Sprite, 5-hour Energy, and Vitamin Water.
- From 2008 to 2010, Hispanic children saw 49 percent more ads for sugary drinks and energy drinks on Spanish-language TV, and Hispanic teens saw 99 percent more ads.
- Hispanic preschoolers saw more Spanish-language ads for Coca-Cola Classic, Kool-Aid, 7 Up, and Sunny D than Hispanic older children and teens did.

Marlene Schwartz, co-author and deputy director of the Rudd Center, said “The beverage industry needs to clean up their youth-directed products: reduce the added sugar, take out the artificial sweeteners, and stop marketing products high in caffeine and sugar to young people. We also need the nutrition facts, including caffeine content, for all beverages, especially energy drinks.”

“Our results clearly show that the beverage industry’s self-regulatory pledges are not working,” concluded co-author Kelly Brownell, director and co-founder of the Rudd Center. “Children are seeing more, not less marketing, for drinks that increase the risk for serious diseases. If the beverage companies want to be considered public health partners, they need to do better.”

Researchers measured youth exposure to marketing and advertising messages from all beverage companies by using syndicated data from The Nielsen Company, comScore, Inc., and Arbitron Inc. When this information was unavailable, independent studies were implemented, along with content analyses and audits inside stores.

The report was supported by grants from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Rudd Foundation.

The full report and tools for consumers and researchers are available at www.sugarydrinkfacts.org. Follow the conversation on Twitter #sugarydrinkfacts.

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