



# Shape Up America!

Healthy Weight for Life

## SEPARATE VIEWING FROM CHEWING

Written By Barbara J. Moore, PhD

The U.S. Surgeon General, Regina M. Benjamin, MD, VADM USPHS has issued a report<sup>1</sup> on the epidemic of overweight and obesity in America. Among the causes of obesity detailed in that report, she says that “The more time children spend watching television, the more likely they are to eat while doing so and the more likely they are to eat the high-calorie foods that are heavily advertised on television.”<sup>2</sup> The evidence to support this statement is presented in a report<sup>3</sup> that details the extent and impact of food marketing to children. The report argues that America’s children need to increase their intakes of fruits, vegetables, legumes, whole grains, and low-fat dairy products, and reduce their intakes of high-calorie and low-nutrient foods and beverages, including snack foods and sweetened beverages. But the reality is that consumption patterns of America’s youth reflect the marketing strategies of the \$900 billion<sup>4</sup> food, beverage and restaurant industries.

According to the Institute of Medicine,<sup>5</sup> the food and beverage industries spend approximately \$10 billion a year on marketing their products through various channels and “the preponderance of the products introduced and marketed for children and youth have been high in total calories, sugars, salt, fat, and low in nutrients.”<sup>6</sup> When the report was released, Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa remarked: “The food industry doesn’t spend \$10 billion a year on ads to kids because they like to waste money. Their ads not only work, they work brilliantly.”<sup>7</sup> Dr. Thomas Frieden, a former health commissioner in New York who now heads the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) predicted that 20 years from now people will look back and say: “What were they thinking? They’re in the middle of an epidemic and kids are watching 20,000 hours of commercials for junk food.”<sup>8</sup>

One key point made in the report is that “[b]efore a certain age, children lack the defenses, or skills, to discriminate commercial from noncommercial content, or to attribute persuasive intent to advertising.” That means that young children can not distinguish TV programs from the commercials and they do not recognize that commercials are designed to sell them a product. Even children who are as old as 11 years of age can fail to make this distinction. These advertisements for unhealthy foods provide children with “pester power” – and parents get worn down and give in to their children’s constant

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Surgeon General’s Vision for a Healthy and Fit Nation. Rockville, MD: Office of the Surgeon General, January 2010.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Surgeon General’s Vision for a Healthy and Fit Nation. Rockville, MD: Office of the Surgeon General, January 2010, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Institute of Medicine. *Food Marketing to Children and Youth: Threat or Opportunity?* National Academies Press 2006500 Fifth Street NW, Washington DC 20001

<sup>4</sup> Annual sales of these three industries combined. Reference 3, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> The Institute of Medicine was established in 1970 by the National Academy of Sciences. The IOM convenes appropriately credentialed professionals to examine “policy matters pertaining to the health of the public.” The report

<sup>6</sup> Page 4

<sup>7</sup> Quoted by M. Burros, “Federal Advisory Group Calls for Change in Food Marketing to Children” NYTimes.com, December 7, 2005

<sup>8</sup> Quoted by N.R.Kleinfield, “Diabetes and Its Awful Toll Quietly Emerge as a Crisis” NYTimes.com, January 9, 2006

requests for candy, sweetened cereals, cookies, cupcakes and sugary soda and other beverages. As a consequence, the report concludes: “Statistically, there is strong evidence that exposure to television advertising is associated with adiposity in children ages 2-11 years and teens ages 12-18 years.”<sup>9</sup>

Through the development of “advergaming” and other strategies especially appealing to children, the Internet and TV marketers are collaborating in their efforts to control “share of mind,” which is a marketing term referring to the objective of building “cradle to grave” brand loyalty that will turn our children into “super consumers” – indeed supersized consumers.<sup>10</sup> One recent finding from the University of Texas, cited by the IOM report, graphically demonstrates that the percentage increase in the number of new products targeted to children has skyrocketed<sup>11</sup> and this is because our children and teens have money to spend – as much as \$365 billion a year according to one estimate from the California Endowment (see Samuels et al.). The challenge is to reduce our children’s exposure to these commercial messages at home, at school and in the community. Indeed, we all need to turn off the TV, turn off our computers, make wiser food choices, go outside and get more fresh air and physical activity.

The CDC is predicting that one out of every three children will develop diabetes in their lifetimes (for Hispanics, the prediction is one out of two). This is a prediction based upon the unabated escalation of the childhood obesity epidemic which is fueling the epidemic of obesity-related type 2 diabetes.

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<sup>9</sup> Page 9 of IOM report

<sup>10</sup> See Samuels et al. “Food and Beverage Industry Marketing Practices Aimed at Children: Developing Strategies for Preventing Obesity and Diabetes”, November 2003, A Report on the Proceedings from a meeting sponsored by the California Endowment, held in San Francisco in June of 2003.

<sup>11</sup> See Williams J. “Product Proliferation Analysis for New Food and Beverage Products Targeted to Children 1994-2004. University of Texas at Austin Working Paper.