

New to Research

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An analysis of the food composition of TV advertising and its comparison with the Eatwell Guide

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Background: Advertising is a powerful medium for food and drink promotion, which can influence public perceptions of 'normal' food choices^(1,2). Food and drink advertising may run contrary to current healthy eating guidance. Greater understanding of this phenomenon may create opportunities to support health promotion. This study aimed to analyse the content of foods represented in television advertising, in order to compare with the national dietary guidelines.

Methods: Peak-time (7–9 pm) terrestrial television broadcasting (ITV) was recorded for seven consecutive days during November 2015. One researcher estimated portion sizes of advertised meals in 53 adverts using a photographic food portion guide. Proportions (by food group) were compared to dietary guidelines. Food group proportions within individual advertised meals were compared to corresponding Eatwell proportions and analysed using Wilcoxon Signed Rank test (on SPSS software). Estimated proportions of all food groups were represented as an 'EatAsAdvertised' model.

Results: Almost all advertised food groups were significantly different to guidance: fruit and vegetables (F&V) were 35% smaller ($P = 0.008$), dairy was 5% lower ($P = 0.039$), and carbohydrates were 22% lower ($P = 0.216$) whereas protein was 5% higher ($P = 0.005$). Oils were not advertised. High fat, sugar, and salt (HFSS) foods represented 35% of advertised

foods (comparison impossible due to removal from Eatwell pie chart).

Discussion: The highest proportions of food advertised were from the alcohol and HFSS group, yet these now appear external (and unquantified) to the current Eatwell guide. This agrees with previous research⁽³⁾, which also identified HFSS foods as the most commonly advertised (41%), compared to protein (3%), F&V (4%), dairy (10%) and carbohydrate foods (20%). This phenomenon may promote unhealthy food behaviours in conflict with the Eatwell Guide. Lack of quantifiable comparison guidance in the Eatwell guide model regarding alcohol and HFSS is a limitation of the tool, as is the seasonal nature of the advertising surveillance. Future research may include adverts recorded over a longer time frame and at different times of year, as well as over multiple channels.

Conclusion: The emphasis on high energy-density food and drink in UK television advertising, and underrepresentation of F&V, does not compare favourably to the Eatwell Guide.

References

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Figure 1: Eatwell Guide

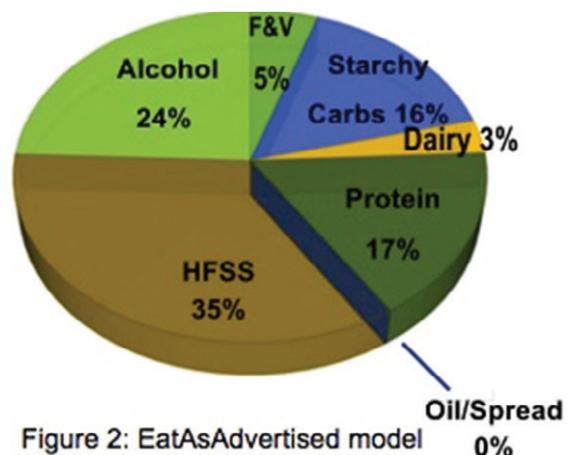


Figure 2: EatAsAdvertised model