



e-quilibrium

- *“electronic briefs on behavior and health”*

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Food Ads

Consider the following situation. You arrive home after work and turn on the television. Although you are neither particularly engaged in the program nor the advertisements, one of the advertisements is for a popular cookie that depicts children enjoying a snack of the cookies, and obviously having a good time. Which of the following is most likely?

- a) The ad won't have any effect on your eating behavior since you weren't paying close attention.
- b) The ad won't have any effect on your eating behavior because the ad is targeted toward children.
- c) The ad will only affect your eating behavior if you have the advertised brand of cookies readily available to you.
- d) You are more likely to snack on anything (including nutritious foods) and more likely to overeat at dinner.

In a recent article published in Health Psychology, Yale University psychologists Jennifer Harris, John Bargh, and Kelly Brownell report that in spite of food advertisers' claim that ads aimed at children only affect children, the ads also affect adults' eating behavior. Also, in spite of claims that ads only affect consumption of the food depicted in the ad, after viewing food ads that depict children eating and having a good time, both children and adults subsequently consumed more food. The additional consumption occurred with snacks and meals, and included both non-nutritious and nutritious foods depending upon what was available. The correct answer is “d.”

This research is particularly interesting to me given the background of two of the research collaborators. John Bargh has

published extensively regarding how human behavior is largely automatic, triggered by environmental cues. Kelly Brownell is internationally known as an obesity expert who has been outspoken about how we live in a “toxic environment” with respect to the promotion and ready-availability of calorie-dense low-nutrient foods. Automatic behavior in a toxic environment is a “weighty” combination.

The adults in the research described above thought that they were in a study of the effects of TV on mood. They were not aware that their food intake was being monitored, and they believed that what they watched on television did not affect their subsequent eating behavior. From a public health standpoint, efforts to regulate food advertising have been concerned only with children. It appears that adults are also affected by food ads designed to reach children.

The Yale psychologists propose that awareness of the effect of food ads is an initial step in reducing the automatic cuing impact of these ads. Furthermore they suggest that adults need to be particularly careful about the influence of food ads when their self-control is most depleted, such as at the end of a long work day. Evening hours are “prime time” for advertisers for more than one reason.

Be aware! While food ads cannot directly put food into our mouths, the research I’ve described here (along with other studies) makes it clear that they subtly affect our eating behavior. Steps to take to minimize the impact of food ads on weight and health include:

- Remember that food ads do affect us.
- Make sure that nutritious foods are most readily available in the event that “automatic” eating occurs.
- Many urges to eat are cravings, not hunger, and cravings will pass with time, especially when getting one’s mind on something else. Doing something physically active (such as walking) is a healthy distracter to cope with cravings.
- Decrease exposure to food ads by keeping the television off, especially when tired or stressed (because self-control may be most depleted at such times).

- Build self-control strength by getting adequate rest, nurturing positive emotions, and practicing restraint when experiencing cravings.

Paul J. Hershberger, Ph.D.

... is a clinical health psychologist. He is Professor of Family Medicine and Director of Behavioral Science for the Family Medicine Residency Program, Wright State University Boonshoft School of Medicine. His clinical practice includes psychotherapy, consultation, and coaching.

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To contact Dr. Hershberger:

e-mail: paul.hershberger@wright.edu

phone: (937) 278-6251, ext 2021