

# Science MATTERS! ... IN CONNECTICUT

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## UNHEALTHY FOOD MARKETING



# & Childhood OBESITY



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Childhood **obesity** is a major public health concern in the U.S. Approximately one out of every three children is either **overweight** or obese. Obesity is a serious condition as it can increase the risk of other diseases such as heart problems, **asthma**, and **type 2 diabetes**. Evidence suggests that there are disparities

in the risk of childhood obesity. This means that some children are more likely to be obese due to their **socioeconomic** circumstances (status) such as living in neighborhoods with less access to affordable healthy foods, low parental educational attainment, and living below the federal household poverty level.

Researchers from a variety of fields including public health, psychology, nutrition, public policy and medicine conduct scientific studies to identify key contributing factors to childhood obesity. Findings from these studies have demonstrated that screen time (e.g., watching TV and using mobile devices) is associated with increased exposure to the marketing of unhealthy foods.



In the U.S., food companies spend \$1.8 billion per year to target marketing to children. Instead of advertising fruits and vegetables that are healthy for children, the overwhelming majority of ads are meant to persuade children to eat foods that are high in calories, sugar, fat, and/or sodium (e.g., fast food, sugary drinks, and candy). Food companies target children by placing ads for unhealthy foods on children's TV shows, children's websites, mobile devices and even in schools. Food companies are

very good at disguising marketing so that children may not realize they are being influenced by an ad for unhealthy food. For example, unhealthy food marketing is disguised in online games, free giveaways, and through **viral marketing** on social networking websites like Facebook. Targeted marketing by food companies makes it difficult for children to avoid the influence of unhealthy food ads. One effective way to protect children from these ads is through **public policy**.

An aim of the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity is to reduce the prevalence of childhood obesity by conducting rigorous research to inform public policies such as those related to soda taxes, the regulation of marketing in schools, and healthier fast food kids' meal ordinances.

The objective of these policies is to hold the food industry responsible for the targeted marketing of unhealthy foods to children.



## WORDS to know

**Obesity:** A weight classification determined by the Body Mass Index (BMI). BMI is calculated as the ratio of a person's body weight to a person's height. Children at or above the 95th percentile for their age are obese.

**Overweight:** Children with a BMI at or above the 85th percentile and less than the 95th percentile

**Asthma:** A treatable respiratory condition causing difficulty in breathing.

**Type 2 diabetes:** A treatable condition that prevents your body from producing insulin. Insulin helps turn sugar into energy, which keeps blood sugar levels from getting too high.

**Socioeconomic Status:** A measure of a person's education, income, and occupation.

**Viral Marketing:** A form of marketing spread by social media users by liking, following and sharing information posted by brands. For children, this type of marketing is effective, as it appears to be coming from their friends and not a company.

**Public Policy:** A system of laws, regulatory measures, courses of action, and funding priorities concerning a given topic.

**Metabolic Syndrome:** The name for a group of risk factors that raises your risk for heart disease and other health problems, such as diabetes and stroke.

## Meet The Scientist

I am a third-year PhD student at Brandeis University's Heller School for Social Policy and Management. As a Master's student in Public Administration, I became interested in obesity research while working on a study aimed at decreasing **metabolic syndrome** in New York City high school students. Although my interest in obesity research did not begin until I was older, as a child I was passionate about dance, an activity that required knowledge about how to maintain a healthy diet and active lifestyle.

## SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

Researchers who study obesity and the marketing of unhealthy foods to children typically have a graduate or professional degree in their field of study, including a Master of Public Health, Master of Public Administration, Master of Business Administration, JD, MD or PhD. To conduct rigorous scientific research requires training in quantitative and qualitative reasoning, critical thinking and writing.

## For Students and Teachers Making Curriculum Connections, see the following:

### Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) - Common Core State Standards (CCSS): Mathematics

- CCSS.Math.Practice.MP1 Make sense of problems and persevere in solving them
- CCSS.Math.Practice.MP3 Construct viable arguments and critique the reasoning of others
- CCSS.Math.Practice.MP5 Use appropriate tools strategically

### CSDE - Next Generation Science Standards: Scientific and Engineering Practices

- Asking questions and defining problems; developing and using models; planning and carrying out investigations; analyzing and interpreting data; using Mathematics and computational thinking; constructing explanations and designing solutions; engaging in argument from evidence; and obtaining, evaluating, and communicating information.

## Hyperlinks:

<http://www.uconnruddcenter.org/food-marketing-presentations-for-download>

[http://www.uconnruddcenter.org/files/Pdfs/272-7%20%20Rudd\\_Targeted%20Marketing%20Report\\_Release\\_081115%5B1%5D.pdf](http://www.uconnruddcenter.org/files/Pdfs/272-7%20%20Rudd_Targeted%20Marketing%20Report_Release_081115%5B1%5D.pdf)

[http://www.uconnruddcenter.org/files/Pdfs/FACTS-2017\\_Final.pdf](http://www.uconnruddcenter.org/files/Pdfs/FACTS-2017_Final.pdf)

