The influence of food packaging on children’s snack food preferences in Guatemala

The Non-Communicable Disease Prevention (NCDP) program supports the generation of new knowledge to help inform policies and programs that are low cost but can have a high impact on reducing the non-communicable disease (NCD) burden and improving overall population health in low- and middle-income countries. NCDP funds research focusing on the main risk factors for NCDs: tobacco use, unhealthy diet, alcohol misuse, and physical inactivity.

The challenge

The global childhood obesity epidemic is a major public health concern. Like in high-income countries, rates of obesity and overweight have been increasing in low- and middle-income countries. Guatemala is now struggling with the “double burden” of malnutrition, with under- and over-nutrition both being important problems.

Marketing is playing a key role in the obesity epidemic, especially in the advertisement and packaging of high-calorie snack foods. Food promotion and branding of food packages with licensed characters (such as cartoon characters) have a direct effect on children’s preferences, knowledge, and behaviours regarding food. Experiences from different countries suggest that banning the use of licensed characters in food advertising can decrease children’s recognition of products and brands and reduce their preference for these foods. Therefore, regulation of food marketing is one of the policy strategies proposed to address obesity in children. In order to formulate appropriate regulations, we need to fully understand the influence of food marketing on children’s food choices.

Expected results

The project aims to:

• provide evidence on how food advertising can affect children’s decisions about what they eat;
• produce a policy brief, presenting the main results of the study and their implications, to inform decision-makers and the media;
• promote the establishment of national norms applying to every school in Guatemala, through established connections with decision-makers in the Ministries of Health and Education;
• examine the effect of marketing with licensed characters on preschool-aged children’s tastes and snack food preferences;
• explore the views of school-aged children toward child-oriented food packaging and its influence over their energy-dense snack food preferences and what they plan to buy.

The research

This study will use a variety of methods to better understand the influence of food packaging from a child’s perspective.

The project’s general objective is to determine the influence that food packaging has on preschool and school-aged children’s high-calorie snack food preferences in Guatemala.

The specific objectives of the project are to:

• analyze the nutritional content and packaging of energy-dense snack foods marketed to children inside Guatemalan public schools and their surrounding areas;
• examine the effect of marketing with licensed characters on preschool-aged children’s tastes and snack food preferences;
• explore the views of school-aged children toward child-oriented food packaging and its influence over their energy-dense snack food preferences and what they plan to buy.

For more information on this project, contact Robert Geneau, Senior Program Specialist, Ottawa, Canada (rgeneau@idrc.ca)

The Non-Communicable Disease Prevention (NCDP) program is part of Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC), a Canadian Crown Corporation supporting research in developing countries to promote growth and development for more than 40 years.

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Project duration: January 2012 to January 2014
Funding: CA$106,800
Lead Researchers: Joaquin Barnoya (barnoyaj@wudosis.wustl.edu), Fundación Aldo Castañeda, Guatemala; Paola Letona, Institute of Nutrition of Central America and Panama (INCAP), Guatemala

Recipient institution: Fundación Aldo Castañeda, Guatemala

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