

Marketing of Unhealthy Food and Beverages in Alberta Recreational Facilities

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Issue:

The number of overweight and obese children in Canada is growing (1) and these children are at risk of remaining overweight over their lifetime (2-4). Overweight or obese children also have a greater risk of experiencing chronic diseases that were traditionally found in adults (1), with a reported four out of every ten children in Canada having at least one risk factor for heart disease (5). While the combination of unhealthy eating and sedentary lifestyles is associated with growing obesity rates, even more fundamental are the changes in environments that encourage those behaviours. Examples of such environments include those where unhealthy foods and beverages are readily available and heavily promoted to children.

Many communities have publicly funded recreational facilities. The mandate of these facilities is to promote well-being for users by providing opportunities for people of all ages to be active, socialize and interact with others, learn new skills, and have fun in their communities (6). Recreational facilities are well positioned to promote the health of children by creating opportunities for free play, hosting local sport organization activities, and offering classes and programs tailored for kids to increase their physical activity levels. Unfortunately, these same facilities, and the sport and recreation opportunities offered within them, are often saturated with marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages that target children. Ads placed on scoreboards, arena boards, team jerseys, in community recreation guides, and at athletic events undermine the health and wellness mandate of these facilities (7).

One common form of marketing observed within recreational facilities is the sponsorship of sport teams, including uniforms, equipment, and events. There is evidence to suggest that in the past, the motive behind sponsoring a team may have been philanthropic (8). However, in today's environment these actions are also closely tied to image, business objectives, and sales (8). Often companies that produce unhealthy products use sponsorship to increase brand awareness, counter 'bad' publicity, and become more publicly identifiable (9). This type of brand promotion is not only cost-effective for companies, but is also more accepted by the public (10).

A population assessment in Australia found that Australian children are cumulatively exposed to up to 64,000 hours per week of food and beverage sponsorship at organized sports, depending on the number of children participating in each sport and the sport's level of food and beverage sponsorship (11). In an analysis of food and beverage sponsors in Australian sports clubs, experts agreed that half of the sponsorships were not marketing healthy products (12). Removing unhealthy food and beverage sponsorship has been identified as an important and feasible action to promote healthfulness of community sport clubs (13).

Impact of food and beverage marketing in sports

Food and beverage marketing within recreation settings can influence the food choices and consumption patterns of child and adult patrons alike. Marketing unhealthy products in recreational facilities associates the product with healthy images (10) and in some cases, even makes claims of helping with sport performance if consumed (14). Athletes are often used to promote products within advertising in these settings as their association offers credibility and can increase the product's attractiveness to consumers (15, 16). One study found that parents who did not regularly read nutrition labels on food often picked energy dense and nutrient poor food due to its association with a sport or an athlete (17).

Promoting unhealthy food and beverages in sports can confuse children's understanding of healthy diets (18). Marketing increases awareness of the brand, which leads people, and particularly children, to try fewer foods, leading them to only buy brands they know (19). When familiar brands are unhealthy options, the negative impact of marketing on both child and future adult health is even more pronounced.

An Australian study found that 39% of children reported feeling better about a sponsor due to their connection to sport, even though few companies gave little more than vouchers for their product to the team they sponsored (12, 20). In fact, a review of the sponsorship of seventy teams found that 67% of the teams have received less than a quarter of their overall income from their sponsor (12, 20). However, in exchange for this small funding contribution, the sponsoring company received valuable publicity through the placement of logos on jerseys and sporting awards, which profiled the company name or brand (12). Moreover, when children on sponsored teams were asked about their views on sport sponsorship, 69% reported sponsors were "cool"; 43% asked parents to buy the sponsors' product; 33% reported they "liked the company more" after getting a voucher or certificate from the sponsor to reward performance; and 59% reported they were more likely to buy the sponsors' product in order to 'return the favour' (20). According to a 2014 survey administered to 1,200 people in Alberta, the majority (75%) of survey respondents support prohibiting advertising and the promotion of unhealthy food and beverages to children under the age of 16 (21).

These findings are consistent with research that has examined the impact of sport-related marketing of tobacco products, which found that this form of marketing affects product recall, attitudes toward the product, and behavioural intentions of youth who are exposed (9). Evidence suggests that marketing linked to athletics or sports influences the way children and adults perceive, purchase, and consume the promoted product or company (20, 22).

Benefits to Taking Action:

- Reducing mixed messages about healthy lifestyles will support public investments in healthy eating and physical activity programs and initiatives. Where Alberta schools and public recreational facilities are co-located or have joint-use agreements, reducing the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages in recreational facilities is especially important to ensure government investments, and efforts to promote comprehensive school health are not undermined. Moreover, as Alberta recreational facilities serve 15,000 to 150,000 users per year depending on their size, and 41-93% of those users are youth (23), interventions in recreational facilities can have a significant health impact at the population level.
- Ensuring the physical environment and opportunities to be physically active within facilities are protected from food and beverage marketing would reduce the influence of marketing on the food choices of adults and children, by making the healthy choice (healthy foods) the easier choice.
- Removing the influence of marketing can reinforce healthy eating messages (12) and reduce child requests for unhealthy foods, thereby assisting recreation facilities in Alberta to in implementing the Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth.
- Action to reduce food marketing in a recreation setting could contribute to de-formalizing food marketing in other settings including schools, communities, and via other media (TV, internet etc.). Over time, this could increase public and decision-maker support, and promote opportunities to address the issue in a whole-environment approach.

Considerations:

Corporate sponsorship of sport and other physical activities is often perceived to be essential to support lower registration and equipment costs or to generate additional revenue for recreation facilities. Addressing this issue requires working with parents and other sport stakeholders to raise awareness about the impact of food and beverage marketing on the health of patrons to increase their support for change.

Taking action to limit food and beverage sponsorship of children's sports may have very minor impact for clubs as these kinds of sponsorships often constitute a very low proportion of a club's revenue (20). However, in some cases, these stakeholders may require active support to secure other revenue sources or sponsors. Alternatives to unhealthy food

and beverage sponsors include seeking sponsorship from grocery franchises, private sector companies that do not sell unhealthy foods and beverages (i.e. construction or technology companies) or companies that produce or sell athletic equipment or apparel.

The Alberta government could also address this issue by establishing a separate and dedicated fund that allows companies who are passionate about supporting sport and recreation to make a financial contribution to this fund. Based on recommendations from Australia (20, 24), government would be responsible for allocating the available funds, but the company would not be permitted to benefit from brand or logo placement or other sponsorship identifiers on funded equipment, at the sporting events, or within the publicly funded recreation facilities. Instead, the company could only reference their contribution to the government-administered fund in general.

The experience of tobacco control efforts in Australia could also inform action in Alberta. As part of a policy to eliminate tobacco industry marketing and sponsorship of Australian sport, in 1991 the Australian government established a health promotion foundation called Healthway (25). Healthway is mandated through its sponsorship program to provide funds to sport, arts and racing organizations in Western Australia, thereby reducing reliance on tobacco industry sponsorship (26). Alberta could similarly establish a dedicated health promotion foundation and include this role within a broader mandate to promote health and prevent disease and injury. To read more about what this type of foundation could achieve in Alberta, visit www.wellnessalberta.ca.

APCCP Priorities for Action:

- Advocate restricting the marketing of unhealthy food and beverages to children.

What's Next:

- Assess and publicly report on the current state of food and beverage marketing within public recreation facilities in Alberta.
- Collaborate with sport and recreation stakeholders in Alberta to review and potentially revise current marketing and sponsorship policies to reduce the prevalence of food and beverage marketing within publicly funded recreational facilities.
- Support a parent engagement strategy to inform, educate, and support parents and other caregivers to seek action to reduce food and beverage marketing to children in Alberta.

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