

Original article

# Nutrition and health claims in products directed at children via television in Spain in 2012



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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To describe the use of nutrition and health claims in products directed at children via television in Spain and to analyse their nutrient profile.

**Methods:** A cross-sectional study of television food advertisements over 7 days in five Spanish television channels popular among children. The products were classified as core, non-core or miscellaneous, and as either healthy or less healthy, according to the United Kingdom Nutrient Profile Model. We registered all claims contained on the product (packaging and labelling) and its advertisement. We calculated the frequency distributions of health and nutrition claims.

**Results:** During the 420 hours of broadcasting, 169 food products were identified, 28.5% in the dairy group and 60.9% in the non-core category. A total of 53.3% of products contained nutrition claims and 26.6% contained health claims; 62.2% of the products with claims were less healthy. Low-fat dairy products were the food category containing the highest percentage of health and nutrition claims.

**Conclusion:** Over half of all food products marketed to children via television in Spain made some type of nutrition or health claim. Most of these products were less healthy, which could mislead Spanish consumers.

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## Alegaciones nutricionales y de salud en productos dirigidos a niños por televisión en España en 2012

### RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** Describir la frecuencia de uso de alegaciones nutricionales y de salud en productos dirigidos a niños por televisión en España y analizar su perfil nutricional.

**Métodos:** Estudio descriptivo transversal de publicidad alimentaria en cinco canales de televisión españoles populares entre los niños durante 7 días. Los productos se clasificaron como esenciales, no esenciales y misceláneos, y como saludables o menos saludables, según el perfil nutricional del Reino Unido. Se registraron las alegaciones nutricionales o de salud presentes en el producto o el anuncio correspondiente, y se calculó su distribución de frecuencias.

**Resultados:** Durante las 420 horas de emisión se identificaron 169 productos alimentarios, el 28,5% del grupo lácteos y el 60,9% no esenciales. El 53,3% de los productos presentaban alegaciones nutricionales y el 26,6% alegaciones de salud. El 62,2% de los productos con alegaciones fueron menos saludables. Los productos lácteos bajos en grasa fueron la categoría alimentaria que contenía el porcentaje más alto de alegaciones nutricionales y de salud.

**Conclusión:** Más de la mitad de los productos alimentarios anunciados para niños por televisión en España presentaban alegaciones nutricionales o de salud. La mayoría de esos productos eran menos saludables, pudiendo inducir a confusión a los consumidores españoles.

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### Palabras clave:

Marketing nutricional

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Publicidad alimentaria

## Introduction

Through its influence on children's food preferences, purchases and consumption, intensive advertising of energy-dense,

nutrient-poor (EDNP) food and beverages is one of the factors lying at the core of the current childhood obesity epidemic.<sup>1</sup> Although advertising makes use of an integrated multi-channel approach, television continues to be the principal avenue for promotion of food and drinks for children.<sup>2</sup> In Spain, television registered the highest turnover in 2012, accounting for 39.2% of all investment in conventional media.<sup>3</sup> The leading non-conventional media are personalised mailing and point-of-sale advertising, through

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information contained on product presentation (labels, packaging and display stands) which is designed to stimulate impulse buying. It has been estimated that children in Spain receive an average of 4000 hits per year of television advertisements of EDNP food and beverages.<sup>4</sup> Two studies on samples of products with nutrition and health claims detected that most of the statements made were ambiguous and in up to 40% of cases were in breach of some law.<sup>5,6</sup> Another study, conducted in 2008 on a sample of foods and drinks advertised on television, found that half of the advertisements of EDNP products made use of such claims.<sup>7</sup>

Nutritional marketing, through the use of nutrition and health claims that draw attention to the nutritional qualities or alleged health benefits of certain products, has appealed to many consumers, and shown itself capable of influencing their perceptions about such products' nutritional quality and healthiness.<sup>8,9</sup> There are experimental studies that show how the presence of nutrition claims induced a group of parents –and particularly the majority who did not read the information contained in the nutrition labelling– to choose EDNP products for their children.<sup>10,11</sup> Similarly, two experimental studies both found that pre-adolescents perceived products with nutrient claims as being healthier and tastier, and were more likely to choose EDNP products carrying such claims.<sup>12,13</sup>

To respond to citizens' interest in the relationship between diet and health, and prevent the use of fraudulent or misleading nutrition marketing, in 2006 the European Commission promulgated the Regulation on nutrition and health claims made on foods.<sup>14</sup> This Regulation envisages the future establishment of nutrient profiles: these would evaluate the overall nutritional value of a given product, through analysis of its ingredients and nutritional composition, and so prevent consumers from being misled by nutrition and/or health claims in food and drinks containing high levels of some nutrient whose excessive consumption might be harmful to health. To date, however, no such nutrient profiles have been established at European level. In addition to adopting European legislation, Spain has seen a number of laws passed and voluntary agreements concluded with the food industry, which govern advertising and nutrition and, to a greater or lesser degree, affect advertising containing health claims.<sup>15</sup> The aim has been to reinforce the public's right to truthful information in this field. Even so, despite this profusion of statutory rules and regulations, no nutrient profile has yet been drawn up at a national level. Consequently, here in Spain, there is the possibility of nutrition and/or health claims being authorised in products which are high in fat, salt and/or sugar (HFSS), provided that they meet the criterion stipulated in the regulation pertaining to the claim made.

The United Kingdom nutrient profiling model (UKNPM),<sup>16</sup> which was drawn up by the Food Standards Agency to regulate food advertising targeted at children and has shown good concordance with alternative nutrient profiles,<sup>17</sup> is one of the models that could be considered for identifying products which are or are not likely, according to their nutrient profiles, to display nutrition or health claims. Accordingly, this study had a twofold aim: firstly, to describe the frequency of use of nutrition and health claims in products directed at children via television in Spain; and secondly, to analyse the nutrient profile of such products by applying the UKNPM, in line with the recommendations of the international network for food and obesity/non-communicable disease research, monitoring and action support.<sup>18</sup>

## Methods

### Study design

We conducted a cross-sectional study of television food advertising directed at children in Spain, by recording 7 days'

broadcasting (Monday to Sunday) by nation-wide channels targeting the child-youth population (Boing, Disney Channel and Neox) and two generalist channels with the highest child-audience viewing indices (Channels 3 and 5).<sup>19</sup> The broadcasts were recorded from January to April 2012, excluding Easter holidays, during a child-audience time slot (8 pm–12 midnight) that had been modified by replacing the 6 pm–8 pm time slot, which had hardly any audience, with the 10 pm–12 midnight time slot, which registered the last daily child-audience viewing peak in Spain.<sup>20</sup> Trained researchers watched the recordings and listed all the products advertised in commercial food and drink communications. Food product placement was not registered due to its variable nature. The information regarding health claims and nutritional profile of the listed products was registered by the same researcher.

### Data-collection and study variables

#### 1). International food-based coding system

Advertised products were purchased and classified into the following three categories according to an international food-based coding system: core (nutrient-rich/calorie-low products); non-core (high in saturated fats, trans-fatty acids, free sugars or salt, and/or energy-dense); and miscellaneous.<sup>21</sup> In the case of products with different varieties or flavours, we coded the brand that was most representative or most easily identifiable in the advertisement. When all or none of the varieties were shown, we chose the one known to have the highest consumption in the general population, e.g., the semi-skimmed variety for dairy products, the most popular in Spain.<sup>22</sup> Finally, when only the brand's name or logo was shown, the company's most representative product was registered.

#### 2). Nutrition and health claims

Pursuant to the European Regulation on nutrition and health claims made on foods, a "nutrition claim" is defined as any claim which states, suggests or implies that a food has particular beneficial nutritional properties due to its energy contribution or nutrient content, and a "health claim" as any claim that states, suggests or implies that a relationship exists between a food category, a food or one of its constituents and health.<sup>14</sup> Due to their low frequency, claims of reduction of risk of disease were pooled with the remaining health claims. As the Regulation is not applicable to alcoholic beverages with an alcoholic strength by volume of over 1.2%, the latter were excluded from the study. To detect the presence of nutrition and health claims in the products advertised, both the presentation of each food product (packaging and labelling) and the content of the pertinent television advertisement (graphic, spoken or written, etc.) were thoroughly analysed.

#### 3). United Kingdom Nutrient Profiling Model

Each food product was examined using the UKNPM, a model that evaluates the nutritional composition of the food/drink advertised by analysing its healthy (fibre, protein, and vegetables, fruit and nuts) and less healthy components (calories, sugars, saturated fats and salt) per 100 g. If the model's algorithm assigns a score of less than 4 for food or less than 1 for drinks, the product is classified as healthy; in all other cases it is classified as less healthy (i.e., EDNP).<sup>16</sup>

We collected nutritional composition information from the product labels themselves. When the product could not be located, we obtained the information from the company's website or by requesting it from the manufacturer. For 24 of the 169 products, we referred to Spanish and international food-composition databases either to complete the data for one or more components, usually grams of saturated fat, sugars, fibre or salt, or alternatively in the case of already reconstituted products, such as pasta.<sup>23,24</sup>

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