

I ♥ TV, I ♥ This Food



It's no surprise that the typical American diet isn't brimming with good health. But it may come as a shock that what we eat is powerfully controlled by TV ads.

The Journal Of the American Dietetic Association has published **new research** that points to skewing of eating decisions by TV advertisements .

To figure out exactly how unhealthy a TV-guided diet would be, researchers studied food commercials appearing during 84 hours of prime-time programming and 12 hours of Saturday-morning cartoons broadcast over the major U.S.

networks. Researchers found that a 2,000-calorie diet consisting entirely of advertised foods would contain 25 times the recommended servings of sugars and 20 times the recommended servings of fat. However, it contained less than half of the recommended servings of vegetables, dairy, and fruits. . "That's almost a month's worth of sugar in one day," notes study leader Michael Mink at Armstrong Atlantic State University in Savannah, Ga.

In fact, the sources of nutrition in the TV-ad diet were almost the exact opposite of what the government's **food pyramid** recommends. Fats and sugars account for the largest portion of calories in a diet based on television advertising. Couple this nutritional inversion with the fact that marketing campaigns are notoriously effective in influencing people's behavior and the result is what many nutrition experts call a toxic environment — one that dissuades Americans from making healthy food choices and encourages inactivity.

Food manufacturers spend about \$11.5 billion per year competing for our food dollars while the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which oversees national nutritional recommendations, spent only \$268 million, or less than 2%, on nutritional education.

Michael Mink says that advertising not only skew toward products that are high in fat, sugar and salt but also guide people away from foods that are rich in essential nutrients, such as vitamins and minerals, contributing to a deficiency in many Americans. The 775 foods advertised on TV contained inadequate amounts of 12 essential nutrients — such as calcium, potassium, fiber, vitamins D and E, and magnesium — and provided an abundance of saturated fat, trans fats, cholesterol, and sodium, which can lead to an increased risk of heart disease, diabetes and stroke.

How About Healthy Ads?

There is hope that if advertising can entice people to choose unhealthy foods, it might also be used to influence people toward fruits, vegetables and other natural or less processed options. Though studies have shown that education campaigns were not very successful in changing American habits, when food-makers started advertising their lower-fat products on TV, their consumption went up almost immediately.

