

## DOES TELEVISION AFFECT TEENAGERS' DIETS?

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Concern has been expressed in recent years that children's food choices may be inappropriately influenced by the messages presented in television advertisements (Morton 1990). However, little empirical information is available on the association between dietary choices and television watching.

This report provides some data on this issue, using data from a 1990 survey of dietary motivations carried out on a statewide random sample of 2082 students in years 7 to 10 in Tasmania. Some of the data obtained from this survey have already been presented elsewhere (Woodward et al. 1991).

We included in our survey instrument the question 'On average, how many hours of commercial TV do you usually watch each day?'. Based on the median answer of 3 h/d, students were divided into 'low-TV' (0-3 h/d) and 'high-TV' (> 3 h/d) groups. These two groups were compared for the various food-related parameters noted above, using a 3-way analysis of variance (TV x gender x grade). Effects described below as 'significant' are those for which the high- and low-TV groups differed at the  $P < 0.05$  level.

Of the 22 foods studied, low- and high-TV groups differed significantly in their mean frequency of consumption (as d/w) of 17 foods (with  $P < 0.01$  for 13 foods). Foods consumed more often by the high-TV group were: ice-cream, meat pie, steak, sausages, biscuits, hot chips, boiled/mashed potato, butter, non-polyunsaturated margarine and soft drink. Foods consumed less often by the high-TV group were: low-fat milks, cheese, breakfast cereals, tomato, apple, polyunsaturated margarine and orange juice. The two groups did not differ in usage of lamb, chicken, bread, cake and full-cream milk.

The high- and low-TV groups also differed significantly in their liking ratings for six foods, perceived healthiness ratings for six foods, perceived frequency of usage by their parents for 17 foods, and for 11 foods perceived frequency of usage by their friends. Almost all of these differences were in the same direction as for personal frequency of consumption. The foods showing a significant TV effect varied between the four parameters, but only bread and orange juice showed no significant effects.

It appears that high school students who watch commercial TV more differ from their peers both in their dietary behaviour and in their perceptions of foods and food norms. These differences generally indicate that, compared with those who watch little commercial TV, the high-TV group make less healthy food choices, and inhabit a social milieu in which the food choices of which they are aware are relatively less healthy. However, our data do not allow us to determine whether TV watching is somehow a cause contributing to unhealthy food choices, or merely one of several symptoms of a generally unhealthy lifestyle.

MORTON, H.N. (1990). *Comm. Health Stud.* 14:153.

WOODWARD, D.R., BALL, P.J., WILLIAMS, H.M., CUMMING, F.J., BOON, J.A. and HORNSBY, H. (1991). *Proc. Nutr. Soc. Aust.* 16: 226.

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