



TV Zaps Children's Fruits and Vegetables

By Jennifer Warner from WebMD Medical News

The More TV Children Watch, the Fewer Fruits and Veggies They Eat

Television may be killing children's eating habits. A new study shows that the more television children watch, the fewer healthy fruits and vegetables they eat. The results indicate that watching TV not only contributes to children's bulging waistlines by making them less physically active, but it also negatively affects their food choices.

Researchers say that children spend more time watching television than engaging in any other activity except sleep. On average, children between 12 and 17 watch an average of 22 hours of television a week.

Although prior studies have linked TV viewing to childhood obesity, researchers now say that until now little was known about how television affects children's eating choices.

How TV Affects Children's Eating Habits

The study, published in the December issue of *Pediatrics*, tracked the TV viewing and fruit and vegetable consumption of 548 seventh grade public school students for 19 months from 1995 to 1997.

At the start of the study, the children reported eating an average of 4.23 servings of fruits and vegetables per day, which is below the recommended five servings per day. The children also reported watching an average of three hours of television per day.

Researchers found that after adjusting for other factors, such as frequency of sit-down dinners and physical activity, the number of fruit and vegetable servings the children ate per day decreased by 0.16 with every additional hour of television viewing reported at the start of the study. That translated to one less serving every six days.

In addition, the number of fruits and vegetable servings decreased by another 0.14 servings per day for each hour of increase in TV watching reported at the end of the study.

Researchers say that means the average child who watched three hours per day of television at the start of the study and increased his or her television viewing by one hour per day over the course of the study

had 2.25 fewer servings of fruits and vegetables per week or up to 110 fewer servings per year than those who did not watch television.

Researchers say the commercials children are exposed to may be to blame for the negative impact of TV on their viewing habits. Children 2 to 11 years old are exposed to an average of 150 to 200 hours of commercial messages or 200,000 commercials a year.

Previous studies have shown that more than half of those commercials are for food, and little of this marketing is aimed at fruits and vegetables. Many of the commercials targeted at kids also contain misleading messages about the nutritional value of the foods advertised.

For example, one study showed that more than 90% of cereal advertisements asserted that the food was part of a “balanced” or “complete” breakfast. Researchers say that kids may also be turned off by food commercials that tout the nutritional content of the food and are encouraged to replace fruits and vegetables with other products that are marketed as “nutritious” but are in fact of little nutritional value.