Protecting children from the harmful impact of food marketing

Fact sheet: August 2017

Key facts

No country in the Western Pacific Region is free from malnutrition

Only one country in the Region has an exclusive breastfeeding rate greater than 50%.

More than 6.2 million children under 5 years of age were overweight or obese in the Region in 2014

The Asia and Pacific region accounted for over US$ 20 billion of US$ 36 billion global growth in infant formula sales since 2003

Marketing of unhealthy foods ranges from 53.7% to 92% of food marketing to children in 9 countries in the Region

Many countries in the Region struggle with multiple forms of malnutrition: undernutrition, overweight and obesity, and diet-related noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) such as heart disease, diabetes and cancer. Acute and chronic malnutrition threaten health, human development, well-being and economic productivity.

WHO recommends exclusive breastfeeding for six months continued up to two years with complementary foods but too many babies in the Region are fed breast-milk substitutes, such as infant formula and ‘growing-up milks’. Marketing of breast-milk substitutes contributes to low rates of exclusive breastfeeding and suboptimal breastfeeding. Breast-milk substitutes continue to be widely promoted, sometimes by health professionals and through health systems. This puts children’s health at risk, exposing them to a higher risk of diarrhoea and other potentially deadly diseases in the short-term, and a higher risk of NCDs and lower IQ long-term.

Wider availability of cheaper, unhealthy food contributes to increasing prevalence of overweight, obesity and diet-related NCDs. Research shows that children, in particular, are extremely susceptible to marketing messages. Acute exposure to food advertising is associated with increased food intake in children.

WHO response

Since governments endorsed the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes in 1981, 19 other World Health Assembly resolutions have further clarified types of marketing and emphasized the need to strengthen monitoring and enforcement of the Code. However, implementation remains a challenge. In fact, only four countries (Fiji, Palau, the Philippines and Viet Nam) in the Region have fully implemented the Code.

WHO helps countries in the Region to apply the Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF), including through legislating, monitoring and evaluating Code implementation. A study found that the IYCF strategy is effective in mitigating the influence of marketing and thereby improving exclusive breastfeeding rates.

In addition, WHO works with partners such as the International Labor Organization on maternity protection so that mothers can be with their infants to breastfeed, and with UNICEF on a Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative to help new mothers get breastfeeding established after delivery.

The Code and subsequent World Health Assembly resolutions, the Action Plan for Healthy Newborn Infants in the Western Pacific Region (2014-2020), the WHO Set of recommendations on the marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children, the Framework for implementing the set of recommendations, the Western Pacific Regional Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases (2014-2020) and the Action Plan to Reduce the Double Burden of Malnutrition in the Western Pacific Region (2015-2020) recommend effective national measures to protect breastfeeding and restrict food marketing to children.

The Republic of Korea has taken legal measures to protect children from the harmful impact of food marketing, consistent with the WHO Set of recommendations on the marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children.