

Expert meeting on protecting children from the harmful impact of food marketing in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, with a focus on digital marketing^a

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Introduction

Exposure of children to food marketing through digital platforms has increased in recent years, and this affects their food choices and dietary intake significantly (1–3). The WHO strategy on nutrition for the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR) 2020–2030 recommends, as a priority action, restrictions on food marketing to children, in accordance with recommendations of Resolution WHA63.14 of the Sixty-third World Health Assembly (4,5). EMR Member States committed to implementing these restrictions at country level, however, progress on implementation has been slow. As of the time of the meeting, no EMR country had comprehensive policies to restrict marketing of unhealthy food to children (6).

To strengthen actions in the EMR and at country level on the protection of children from the harmful impact of food marketing, WHO held an expert meeting in December 2023. The meeting was to provide updates and review existing guidance documents and tools on the issue, facilitate exchange of experience regarding food marketing policies and identify countries requiring additional support.

Summary of discussions

Children of all ages should be protected from marketing of foods that are high in saturated fatty acids, trans-fatty acids, free sugars, and/or salt, and WHO advises countries to develop and implement policies in this regard. As of the time of the meeting, Islamic Republic of Iran had implemented the most elaborate restrictions, while Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates had implemented some restrictions. However, none of the EMR countries had implemented the comprehensive mandatory restrictions recommended by WHO and none had implemented restrictions on digital food marketing.

A study in Morocco found that 20% of the adverts were for food or beverage products, out of which 78.5% should not have been permitted for children (7). In Oman, a study found frequent use of children in food advertising and that two-thirds of print media advertising was on ready-made or convenience foods (7). One study in Saudi Arabia found that 73% of products promoted with

cartoon characters were high in sugar, 12% were high in fat, 16% were high in saturated fat and 18% were high in salt (7). Another study found that 96.6% of food products advertised on YouTube had low nutritional value (7). In Tunisia, one study found that 84% of food advertisements should not have been permitted for children, and another study found that areas with high density of food retailers selling unhealthy foods were associated with obesity (7).

EMR countries need to conduct more research on food marketing and exposure to digital marketing across to inform policies to regulate food marketing. Considering the extreme complexity of digital marketing and the involvement of many different actors, it is necessary to conduct monitoring studies that will assess the extent of exposure of children to food marketing and recommend strong multisectoral actions on marketing restrictions (8,9).

No single intervention can halt food marketing and improve healthy eating among children, there is therefore a need for multiple interventions such as nutrition education, creating healthier food environments, raising awareness about healthy eating, social behaviour change campaigns, alongside measures to restrict marketing. The establishment of a regional task force on food marketing could help in protecting the health and rights of children in the region.

Recommendations

To Member States

- Raise awareness of the importance and feasibility of tackling food marketing to children at country level.
- Assess and monitor real-life exposure of children to food marketing.

To WHO

- Support mapping of the context for food marketing restrictions in each EMR country, including existing evidence, legislative frameworks, entry points, responsible entities, enforcement mechanisms, and use of media by children.
- Identify and engage relevant legal representatives in the EMR to facilitate the development of model laws and legislation on food marketing in the region.

^a Summary report on the expert meeting on protecting children from the harmful impact of food marketing in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, with a focus on digital marketing. <https://applications.emro.who.int/docs/WHOEMNUT316E-eng.pdf?ua=1>.

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