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The Straits Times (Singapore)

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14 F&B firms pledge to curb ads aimed at kids; Move to take effect on Jan 1 comes amid obesity fight

BYLINE: poon chian hui

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FOURTEEN major food and beverage firms will cut back on advertising to children from Jan 1 to support efforts to tackle obesity in Singapore.

Food Industry Asia announced the initiative yesterday. The industry association said the companies pledging to curb advertising unhealthy foods to those under 12 include Coca-Cola, Nestle, Ferrero and McDonald's.

Research has shown that advertising influences what children buy or choose to eat.

The pledge covers products high in saturated fats, trans fat, sugar or salt. Under this voluntary framework, firms are not to advertise on television, in print and on websites where 35 per cent or more of the audience are under 12.

Only certain products that meet scientifically proven nutritional criteria or adhere to national or international dietary guidelines are allowed.

The move to self-regulate comes on the heels of the Government's announcement last Saturday to ban ads that make unhealthy food appealing to children from early next year.

Companies will also avoid publicising products in primary schools, unless a request is made for educational purposes, such as to promote a healthier lifestyle.

About 9 per cent of children here are obese, putting them at higher risk of chronic ailments like diabetes as they grow older.

Health Promotion Board (HPB) chief executive Ang Hak Seng said the companies' pledge is "an important first step", given the impact of advertising.

A British study published last year found that children aged six to 13 were more likely to want to eat fatty and sugary foods after watching commercials for unhealthy food on TV.

Sweden has banned ads aimed at children aged 12 and younger while Britain and South Korea have regulations restricting food advertising.

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To draw up similar guidelines here, the HPB will be holding an online public consultation next month. Until then, it is unclear what sort of ads will be deemed acceptable.

Currently, some fast-food chains carry ads with a family theme. In a scene in a local commercial, for example, a mother is shown giving a fried chicken drumstick to her son.

But industry players also note that there has been a trend in recent years towards healthier food options.

Mr Jimmy Soh, deputy president of the Singapore Food Manufacturers' Association, said there are more products with less sugar and salt.

Many items made by beverage firm F&N carry the HPB's healthier choice symbol, said Ms Jennifer See, its general manager for corporate marketing.

Ms Yvonne Low, senior director, McDonald's marketing and communications, said it has made its children-oriented Happy Meals more wholesome with the introduction of items such as apple slices and low-fat milk.

She said the company will stop advertising in media channels where children make up more than 35 per cent of the audience from Jan 1.

But Nanyang Technological University's Associate Professor Lee Chun Wah, who specialises in public communications, has doubts about whether the changes will have a lasting impact on children's eating habits.

"Children are increasingly exposed to advertisements on social media such as Facebook and YouTube - all these bypass parental overview," he said. "The kids are basically on their own here."

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