

Consumer Trends: Households with Young Children Buy Fewer Processed Foods

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Newswise — Families with young children are purchasing fewer high calorie drinks and processed foods, which may be a factor in declining rates of childhood obesity, finds a new report in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.

“Somewhere between 2003 and 2010, the upward trend in childhood obesity started to stall, leveling off around 2007,” said lead study author Christopher Ford, M.P.H. of the department of nutrition at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The latest Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data showed a significant decline in obesity among children aged 2 to 5 years, from 12.1 percent to 8.4 percent.

Ford and his co-authors examined food and beverage purchase data between 2000 and 2011 from nearly 43,000 U.S. households with a preschool-age child. They utilized the Nielsen Homescan Panel, which comprises a representative sample of U.S. households, while controlling for major price changes and household income, demographics, and composition.

Taking into account the recessions of 2003 and 2007, “during which there might have been less waste,” notes Ford, the team identified the top 20 foods and beverages purchased per capita during that 11-year period. They assigned household purchases into nine groups for analysis: grain-based desserts, savory snacks, ready-to-eat cereals, sweet snacks and candy, processed meats, soft drinks, juice and juice drinks, plain milk and sweetened milk.

The researchers found the total calories from food and beverage purchases declined significantly. Declines were especially noted in milk, soft drink, juice and juice drinks, and grain-based dessert purchases, all of which include higher calorie solid fats and added sugars. Per capita, calories purchased per day decreased by 182 during the period.

“We know from previous research that 70 to 80 percent of the preschooler diet comes from stores, with the rest coming from school cafeteria and child-care centers,” Ford said.

Hispanic households saw the smallest decrease in total calories purchased, possibly due to less access to stores with bar-coded products and greater proportional spending on fruits and vegetables.

“Discussions about childhood obesity often focus on the negative impacts of fast food,” said Meghan Slining, Ph.D., assistant professor of health services at Furman University. “And while these are indeed valid concerns, foods and beverages

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purchased from supermarkets and grocery stores represent a much greater share of young children's diets. This report suggests important improvements over the past decade in the food shopping behaviors of American families with young children."

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