



# The Market for Highly Processed Food and Drink: Driving Children's Diets China

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## Diets dominated by highly processed products are driving the rise in childhood overweight and obesity in China.

Childhood obesity is increasing rapidly in China with one in five children aged 7-18 years suffering from overweight or obesity.<sup>1</sup> Traditional diets are being replaced by modern diets, based on refined grains, meat and an abundance of highly processed food and drink. These are products that have undergone a series of industrial modifications to make them tasty, attractive and with a long shelf-life. They are energy-dense, contain unhealthy types of fat, refined starches, free sugars and salt, and are poor sources of protein, dietary fibre, and essential vitamins and minerals.<sup>2</sup>

## Analysis of Sales

UNICEF has conducted an analysis of Euromonitor International marketing reports to assess the trends in sales of highly processed food and drink in China. Different categories of products and services associated with the sale of these products were examined.

CATEGORIES	SERVICES
Soft drinks	Fast food outlets
Sweet snacks	Street kiosks
Savoury snacks	Cafés and bars
Baby foods and milk formula	

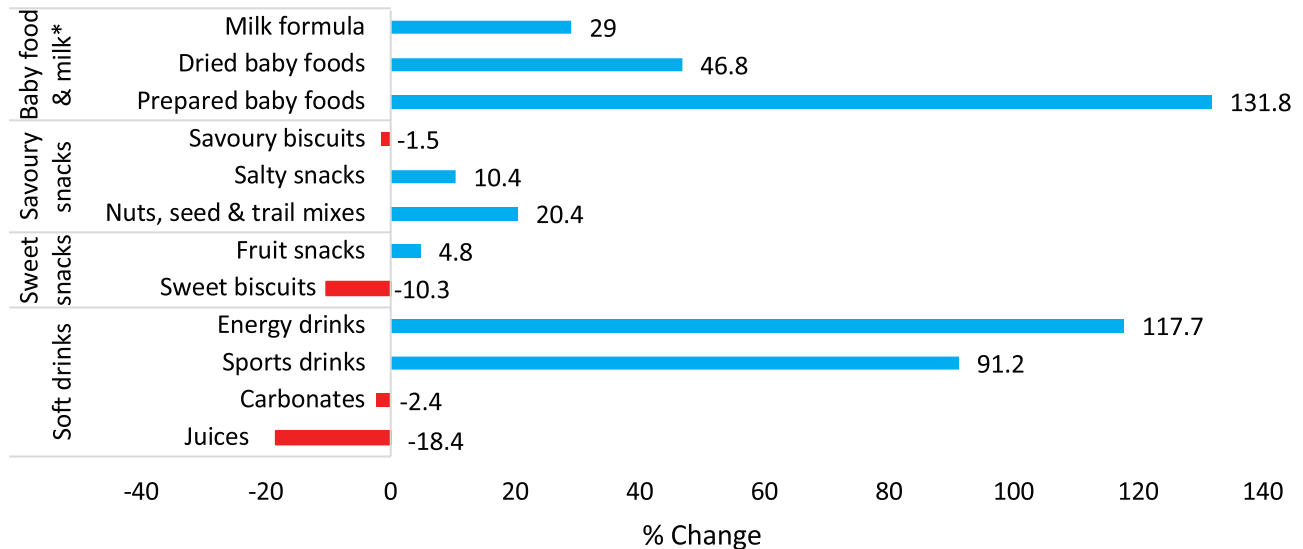
# Findings of the Analysis

## 1 The sale of many highly processed products is growing in China.

Sales are increasing for many types of soft drink, sweet and savoury snacks, baby food and milk formula though there are some exceptions.

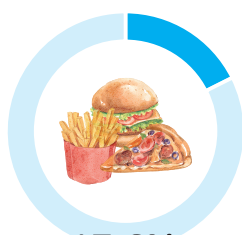


### China: Percentage change in per capita sales, 2014-2019



\*Based on per capita of under five population

### Percentage increase in number of transactions in food service outlets, 2014-2019



17.6%

Fast food outlets



18.7%

Street kiosks



71.4%

Cafés and bars

## 2 The rise in health awareness among Chinese consumers is stimulating an interest in products perceived to be healthier.

Sales of sweet and savoury biscuits, carbonated drinks and juices have all experienced falling sales in recent years. Euromonitor International reports that this reflects concerns about health and lifestyle and that consumers are switching to products that they perceive are 'healthier' such as sports and energy drinks, nut and fruit snacks.

### 3 Companies are responding to consumer demand for healthier food and drink by modifying their products but many remain unhealthy.

Euromonitor International notes that there are signs that companies are reacting to the increased interest in health by reducing the amount of fat, sugar and salt in some of their products and marketing 'healthier' options. However, companies continue to sell highly processed food and drinks that are unhealthy by adopting a range of marketing strategies. In some cases, products are being marketed as 'nutritious' or 'healthy' when in fact they contain excessive amounts of unhealthy ingredients.

Marketing Strategies	Examples
<b>Soft drinks</b> marketed as healthy alternatives.	Sports drinks marketed as 'nutrient supplements' to replace nutrient loss after exercise that contain 24g sugar per 500ml bottle (equivalent to 50% of the WHO daily recommendation for free sugar). <sup>3</sup>
<b>Sweet snacks</b> marketed to appeal to young children.	Mini chocolate bars that are small and cute to attract the attention of children. Several different flavours are meant to appeal to children and cartoon characters endorse the products.
<b>Savoury snacks</b> marketed as diet aids.	Spicy konjac snacks marketed as supporting weight loss because konjac (an edible corm) is not easily digested which contains 1,317mg sodium per 100g (equivalent to 66% of the WHO daily recommendation for sodium). <sup>4</sup>
<b>Baby foods</b> marketed as suitable for children below 36 months.	Yogurt-based drinks marketed as a complementary food that provides multiple nutrients but with added sugar. A typical product contains 75.3g carbohydrate per 100g (while it is not clear what the term 'carbohydrate' covers, the WHO recommendation for 'free sugars' for children aged 2-3 years is below 35g per day which is less than half the carbohydrate content in 100g of yogurt drink). <sup>16</sup> WHO considers that breastmilk substitutes should not be promoted or marketed to children under the age of 36 months. <sup>5</sup>
<b>Fast food outlets</b> promoting Western-style food.	Popular fast food chains dotted over one thousand cities in China serve a meal of fried chicken with a side of chips, raspberry freeze drink and chocolate mousse dessert that together contain more than 2,000kcal. This means that a child can consume more than the daily energy requirement in a single meal.
<b>Street kiosks</b> popularising new products to attract children.	Bubble tea (pre-packaged and ready to drink) that contains 215kcal per 80g dry contents which with added water provides about 300ml of tea (equivalent to 11% of the WHO recommendation of around 2,000kcal per day for adults and children in one serving). <sup>6</sup>

# 4 China does not yet have strong regulation in place to control the sale and marketing of highly processed food and drink especially to children.

## Recommendations

1. Strengthen national legislation to control the marketing of breast-milk substitutes and promote breastfeeding.
2. Introduce clear front-of-pack labelling especially for foods that are consumed by children.
3. Build on consumer demand and preference for healthy eating, especially among children and adolescents through national and local campaigns.
4. Introduce robust restrictions to reduce the harmful impact of marketing of unhealthy foods to children.
5. Consider introduction of taxes on sugary drinks.
6. Introduce menu labelling for purchased foods in all restaurants especially fast food restaurants.
7. Ensure that the formulation and implementation of policy and regulations to control the sale and marketing of food and drink are free from the influence of the food industry.

**The Government of China should take immediate action to regulate the food and beverage industry and build awareness about the importance of healthy diets among consumers.**



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- 4 WHO. Sodium intake for adults and children: Guideline. 2012.
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