

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



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

The prevalence of overweight and obesity among Vietnamese children more than doubled among children aged 5-19 years and rose by more than one third in children under 5 years of age over a 10 year period between 2010 and 2020.^{1,2,3} 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.⁴

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 Vietnam. 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
Milk formula	

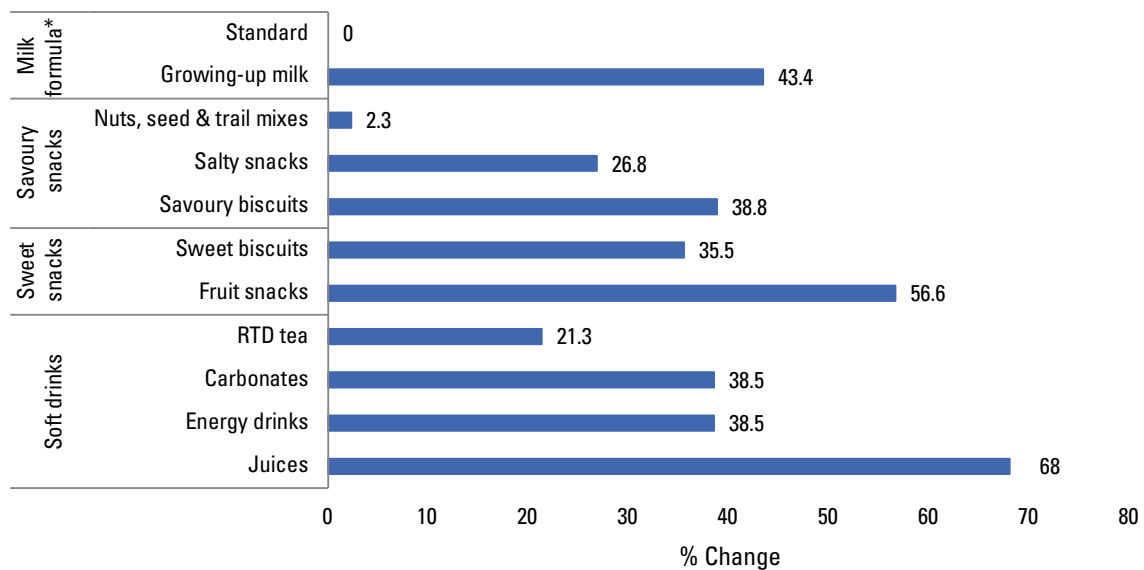
Findings of the Analysis

1 The sale of highly processed products is growing in Vietnam.

Sales are increasing for most types of soft drink, sweet and savoury snacks, and growing-up milk. There has also been steady growth in the number of transactions in fast food outlets, cafés and bars though street kiosks transactions have remained stable and overall the number of transactions remain relatively low.

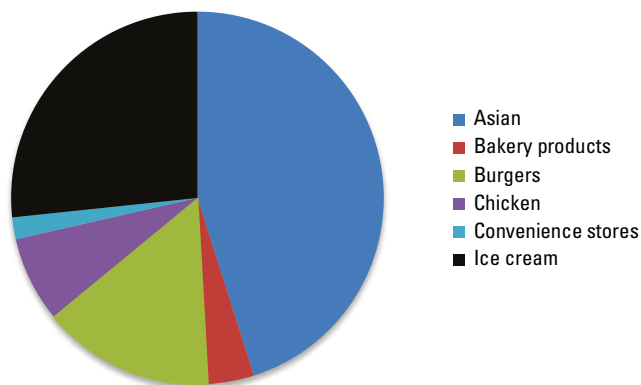


Vietnam: Percentage change in per capita sales, 2014-2019



*Based on per capita of under five population

Percentage share of transactions by type, 2017



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

While sales are rising, so too is health awareness among Vietnamese consumers. Euromonitor International reports rising sales in products such as soft drinks marketed as lower sugar, snacks that are organic or fortified with vitamins and minerals, and foods that are non-fried.

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
<p>Soft drinks <i>marketed as healthier alternatives.</i></p>	<p>RTD iced black tea marketed as 'delicious and refreshing' and having 'less sugar' but which contains 26g sugar per 455ml bottle (equivalent to 52% of the WHO daily recommendation for 'free sugars' for both adults and children).⁵</p>
<p>Sweet snacks <i>marketed as healthy and enjoyable.</i></p>	<p>Milk and egg free biscuits with added honey marketed as trans-fat free for those who love taking care of themselves and enjoying life but that contain 475kcal and 18g sugar per 120g packet. A child of 3-4 years of age requires around 1,500kcal energy per day⁶ so one packet represents around a third of total daily energy intake and 36% of total daily 'free sugars' intake.</p>
<p>Savoury snacks <i>marketed with healthier processing techniques.</i></p>	<p>Spicy shrimp snacks sold in a 40g packet and marketed as 'non-fried' with the fresh taste of shrimp. While low in fat, one packet contains 387mg sodium (equivalent to 20% of the WHO recommendation of <2,000mg sodium per day).⁷</p>
<p>Milk formula <i>marketed as suitable for children aged 2-4 years.</i></p>	<p>'Growing up' milk marketed as '3-in-1' because it provides essential nutrients to support brain development, weight gain and height growth, and enhances the child's immune system. Typically, while there is detailed information provided on tins on the protein, energy, vitamin, mineral and fatty acid content of the products, no information is provided on the sugar content. WHO considers that breastmilk substitutes should not be promoted or marketed to children under the age of 36 months.⁸</p>
<p>Fast food outlets <i>selling combinations of food and drink.</i></p>	<p>A popular chained fast food outlet selling a combo of burger, soft drink and French fries that contains around 74g sugar (exceeding the total daily 'free sugars' recommended intake of 50g), 12g saturated fat (more than half the total daily recommended intake of 22g)⁹ and 1195mg sodium (60% of total recommended intake of 2,000mg).</p>
<p>Cafés and bars <i>popularising new products.</i></p>	<p>Popular brown sugar milk bubble tea, attractive to children, contains 22g of sugar (equivalent to nearly half the total daily 'free sugars' recommended intake of 50g) in one cup.</p>

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

The Government of Vietnam should take immediate action to regulate the food and beverage industry and build awareness about the importance of healthy diets among consumers, particularly children.

Recommendations

1. Extend legislation on the marketing of BMS to cover children up to 36 months of age, and to protect 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.
4. Introduce robust restrictions to reduce the harmful impact of marketing of unhealthy foods to children.
5. Take relevant actions including fiscal measures such as taxation on sugar-sweetened beverages to prevent child overweight and obesity.
6. Introduce menu labelling for purchased foods in all restaurants especially fast food restaurants.
7. Reduce the influence of food industry in the formulation and implementation of policy and regulations to control the sale and marketing of food and drink.

¹ Vietnam National Nutrition Survey 2020.

² Vietnam National Nutrition Surveillance 2010.

³ Vietnam National Nutrition Surveillance 2019.

⁴ Monteiro CA, Cannon G, Moubarac JC, Levy RB, Louzada MLC, Jaime PC. The UN decade of nutrition, the NOVA food classification and the trouble with ultra-processing. *Public Health Nutr.* 21(1):5-17). 2018.

⁵ WHO. Sugar intake for adults and children: Guideline. 2015.

⁶ FAO/WHO/UNU Expert Consultation. Energy and protein requirements. 1991.

⁷ WHO. Sodium intake for adults and children: Guideline. 2012.

⁸ WHO. Ending inappropriate promotion of foods for infants and young children. The Sixty Ninth World Health Assembly. 2016.

⁹ WHO. Guidelines: Saturated fatty acid and trans-fatty acid intake for adults and children. Geneva. Draft issued for public consultation. 2018.