

A Quantitative Assessment of an Edmonton TV Diet

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Background and Objective

Marketing unhealthy food and beverages to children has alarmed a number of national and international organizations. In 2010, the World Health Organization (WHO) called for governments to take action to reduce the volume and impact of marketing of unhealthy foods in order to protect the health of children¹. Studies have shown that ads for snack foods increased the consumption of those foods by 45% in children² and that the number of ads for unhealthy foods a child is exposed to has a direct effect on a child's body-mass index (BMI)³. This is of particular concern given that a recent global study to establish television advertising baselines showed that Alberta had one of the highest rates of TV food/beverage advertising and that 80% of the food/beverage ads in Alberta promoted unhealthy items compared with a global average of 67%⁴.

Objective: This study was conducted to compare the nutritional values of food products advertised on television in Edmonton, Alberta with the recommended daily intake of nutrients to determine the variance between a “TV diet” and the recommended consumption of food for children. A TV diet comprises the food that is advertised on television.

Methods

•Advertisements were recorded over three days in January 2008 from 6:00 am to 10:00 pm for four channels (CTV, Global, Teletoon, and YTV) in the Edmonton, Alberta area.

• The ads were coded as food vs. non-food and food ads were coded as core (healthy) vs. non-core⁴.

•Only ads for specific food items were included in the nutritional analysis. Ads for grocery stores or restaurants were not included.

•Nutrition contents of one standard serving of each food advertised were obtained from the advertiser's Canadian website, food labels on products in a grocery store or from an international (US) website.

•Key nutrients documented were calories, fat, saturated fat, trans fat, carbohydrates, sugar, protein, sodium and fibre.

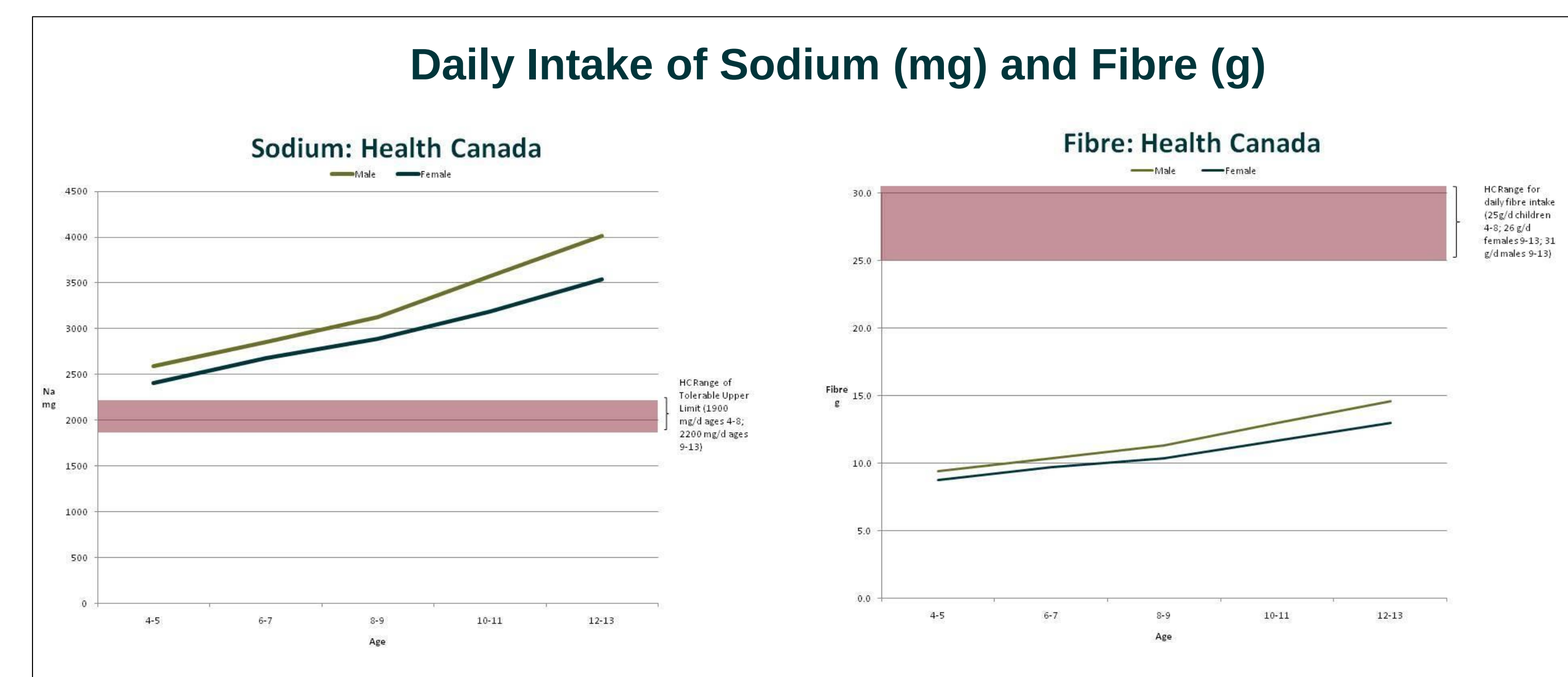
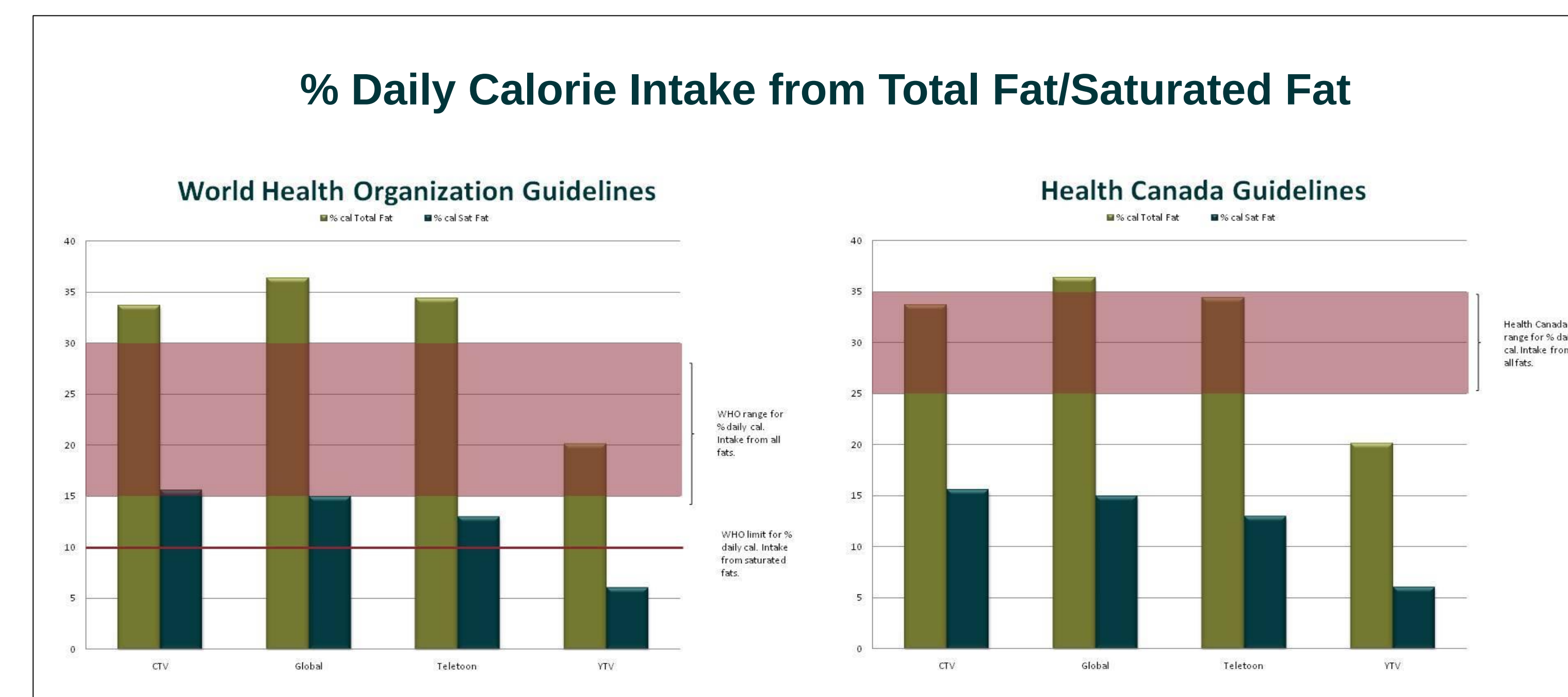
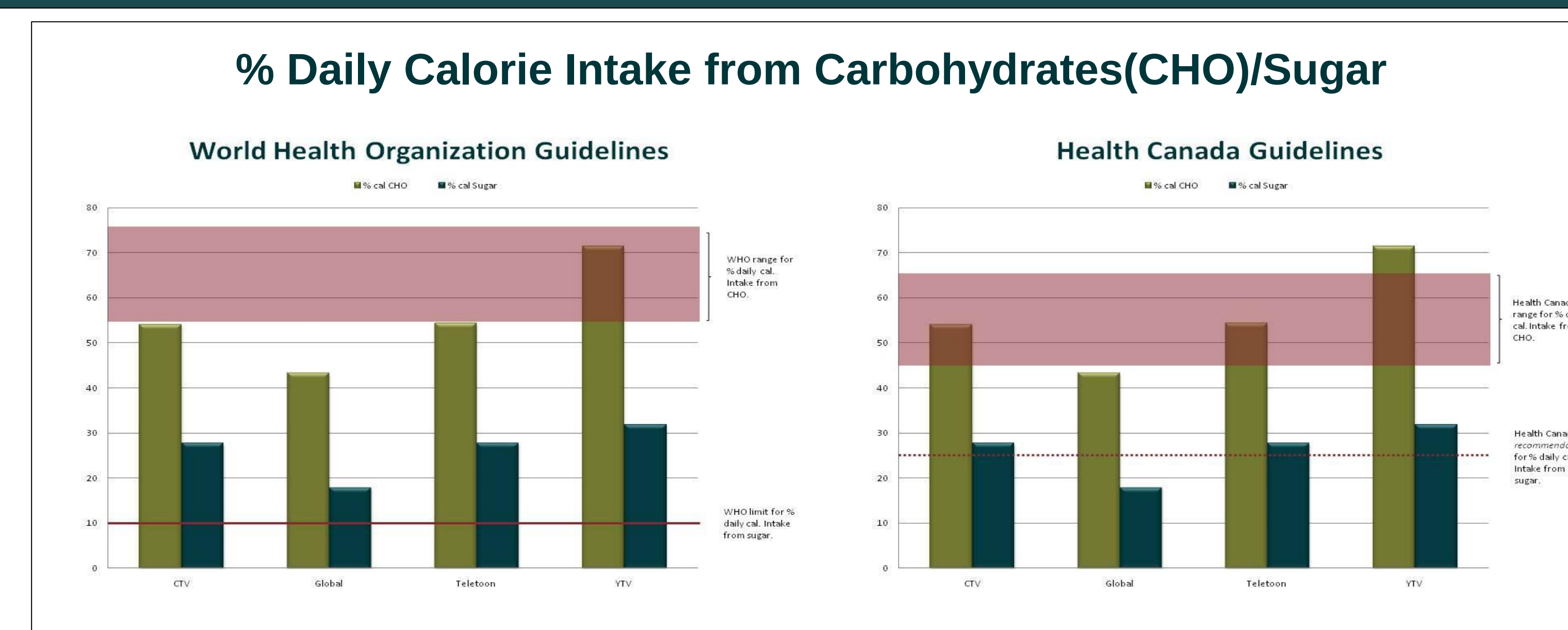
• The nutrient contents of all foods advertised were totaled over 3 days and averaged to provide a total nutrient content per day per channel.

•The percentage of energy in calories from each macronutrient was calculated using standard procedures of 9 cal/g of fats, and 4 cal/g each of carbohydrates and protein.

•Daily sodium intake and fibre intake were assessed by averaging all data for total fibre/day and total sodium/day. The sodium and fibre intake was determined by calculating the mg of sodium or g of fibre per calorie in the TV diet and multiplying by the Health Canada recommended daily energy intake for a low activity level child by age⁵ (e.g. 1.78 mg Na/cal x 1450 cal = 2581 mg Na).

•Health Canada guidelines did not fully account for unhealthy sub-categories of macronutrients (sugar, saturated fat) necessitating the use of WHO guidelines.

Results



Conclusions

The TV Diet represented by these ads is inconsistent with many nutrition recommendations for obesity and chronic disease prevention.

Given the evidence of the potential health effects of advertising unhealthy foods and beverages to children and Alberta's high rate of such advertising, policies should be considered to counteract the possible negative health impacts.

There are a wide variety of policy options available to protect children. These include restricting advertising of unhealthy foods and beverages during children's peak viewing times/programming, ensuring equal ad time for healthy food products, or an outright ban of advertising to children on TV. Policies restricting advertising to children already exist in other jurisdictions (Québec, Sweden).

There is support for such policies in Alberta. When surveyed, 71% of responding Alberta decision-makers in government, schools, workplaces and the media reported that they would support prohibiting advertising of unhealthy foods and beverages to children under 16⁶.

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