

Parents ‘misled and deceived’ over sugary baby food, says Unicef

Processed foods wrongly sold as healthy products are being marketed for toddlers across southeast Asia, an investigation has found



The report warns that unhealthy foods and misleading packaging is thriving amid weak regulation CREDIT: Simon Townsley

Parents across Southeast Asia are being “misled and deceived” by sugary baby foods that are wrongly sold as healthy products, an investigation has revealed.

In a report analysing 1,600 mass produced products aimed at toddlers sold in Southeast Asia, Unicef found that just 11 per cent were justified in claiming they were “all natural” or contained vegetables and reduced salt.

The study, published on Wednesday (December 13, 2023), also found that almost half of foods contained added sugars and sweeteners, while a third included more sodium than recommended.

It comes amid growing concerns that childhood obesity is “spiralling out of control” in Southeast Asia.

“East Asia and the Pacific is the region that is experiencing the fastest growth [in the number] of overweight children worldwide,” Dr Roland Kupka, Unicef’s regional nutrition advisor, told the Telegraph on December 14, 2023.

“It’s spiralling out of control here – from seven per cent 20 years ago, to 23 per cent now. That’s going to grow 11 further if no action is taken.”

Sales of packaged foods have surged by 45 per cent across Southeast Asia in the last five years, according to Euromonitor International, raising fears the region is turning into a “food swamp” dominated by an abundance of high-calorie, low-nutrient processed foods. The latest report from the UN agency – which looked at food markets in Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand – warned that unhealthy foods and misleading packaging is thriving amid weak regulation.

None of the countries, for instance, have government policies on the ingredients and labelling of processed foods which follow international standards.

In the Philippines, Laos, and Cambodia, 100 per cent, 98 per cent and 81 per cent of packaging respectively was not even in the local language.

“We’re seeing a rising tide of highly processed food full of cheap ingredients and skillfully marketed underpinning the rapid rise in overweight children, and displacing the local food culture,” said Dr Kupka, adding that poor diets as a toddler have lifelong consequences.

“[Being] overweight often starts very early in life and then tracks across the lifespan and causes all sorts of health challenges,” said Dr Kupka. “Taste preferences are also formed early – if you get used to more sugar as a child, you’re more likely to consume it as an adult.”

Processed food ‘important piece’ of obesity puzzle

But he said that, unlike America and Western Europe, Southeast Asia has a unique opportunity to combat the rise of processed foods, given the market is still small compared to high-income countries.

“The region still has an opportunity to shape the direction of the [processed food market]. For instance, the food retail sector is still fairly undeveloped,” said Dr Kupka.

“There is strong growth, but there are still ways to influence the trajectory of these sectors ... and avoid some of the problems with highly processed foods that Western Europe and North America are facing.”

The report added that the most important factor was to provide parents and caregivers with more information about nutritional value of different foods in order to help them make healthy choices.

While 79 per cent of mothers surveyed in five of Southeast Asia’s cities said they feed their children packaged foods at least once a day, 81 per cent said the nutritional information on labels informs which products they buy.

“[Processed foods] are one important piece of the puzzle when we talk about preventing overweight and obesity,” said Dr Kupka.

“Really a big problem is that those purchasing these products, the caretakers, are not empowered to make the right decisions because they’re being misled by the packaging. Governments must better regulate to stop this happening.” – **www.telegraph.co.uk, December 14, 2023**