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Consumer groups urge end of cartoons on unhealthy children's foods

Key points:

- Consumer groups, members of the European Consumer Organisation (BEUC), call on food companies and retailers to stop using brand mascots and media characters when marketing unhealthy foods to children
- Research shows that character-based marketing impacts children's dietary behaviours
- BEUC members' survey confirms cartoons are massively present on children's foods
- EU health ministers to adopt guidelines on childhood obesity this Friday 16/6.

BEUC and its member organisations are calling today on European food companies and retailers¹ to stop using cartoons when marketing nutrient-poor foods to young consumers. The consumer groups' call applies to both advertising and packaging.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), there is "[unequivocal evidence](#)" that the marketing of foods high in fat, sugar and salt is strongly linked to childhood obesity. Cartoon characters are an especially [powerful and persuasive marketing method](#) to target children. Unfortunately, these characters are overwhelmingly used with unhealthy foods.

BEUC members have surveyed the presence of mascots on supermarket shelves and online adverts in 13 countries². This shopping exercise confirms that the mascots appear on foods that the WHO considers unfit for advertising to children³, i.e. because they are loaded with sugar, salt or fat. Out of over 100 examples, BEUC members discovered only one child-friendly character being used to promote a fruit or vegetable.⁴

Health ministers of EU member States are to meet this Friday 16 June in Brussels to adopt guidelines on how to tackle childhood obesity.⁵ The [text](#) invites Member States to tackle food marketing to children. Member States should heed this call and tackle cartoon characters.

Monique Goyens, Director General of BEUC, the European Consumer Organisation, has commented:

"What parent has never been begged by his or her child to buy breakfast cereals or snacks with a friendly character on the package? Characters that promote low nutrient foods only make it harder for parents to ensure their children have healthy diets. Using characters for unhealthy foods has to stop if we want to protect children's health.

"Children are unable to distinguish between advertising and entertainment. This is something that marketers have understood, but children's health should come before profits. With 1 in 3 children obese or overweight, child obesity has become a major public health concern.

"Numerous international bodies, health experts and consumer organisations have urged food companies to improve their food marketing practices to better protect children. Sadly, little ones remain exposed to many persuasive forms of marketing, both in supermarkets and online.

“National governments must push companies to use cartoons more responsibly. In the meantime, food companies should demonstrate a serious commitment to protecting children by removing these cartoons from unhealthy foods. We’re not calling for Tony the Tiger or the Minions to disappear from ads, we just want the products they promote to children to become healthier.”
ENDS

Note to editors:

- BEUC members have looked at fictional humans, animal cartoons and animated objects used in food marketing. They focused both on licensed media characters, such as the Minions or Batman, and brand mascots, such as Nesquik’s bunny or Frosties’ Tony the Tiger.
- BEUC has sent letters to major food companies present on the European market. BEUC members have contacted companies operating in their relevant national markets.

More info:

- BEUC **Position Paper** [‘Cartoon characters and food: just for fun?’](#), June 2017
- BEUC **letters** to [Carrefour](#), [Danone](#), [Disney](#), [Kellogg’s](#), [Unilever](#), [Universal](#). Others are available upon request.
- **Photos**
 - Brand mascots: <https://www.flickr.com/gp/98784294@N08/gn48a1>
 - Media characters: <https://www.flickr.com/gp/98784294@N08/c5bU26>
 - Mix of brand and media:
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/98784294@N08/albums/72157681878065112>
 - Main [Photo gallery](#) (containing the 3 different albums)

¹ Companies operating in Europe: Auchan, Bel Group, Carrefour, Danone, Dr Oetker, Ferrero, General Mills, Intersnack, Kellogg’s, Mars, McDonald’s, Mondelez, Nestlé, Pepsico, Perfetti, Unilever. Entertainment: 20th Century Fox, Disney, Nintendo, Rovio, Sony, Universal.

² Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, UK.

³ See the World Health Organisation European Regional Office’s [nutrient profile model](#), pg. 5, 2015.

⁴ Our UK member Which? found an example of ‘The Minions’ being used to promote tinned sweetcorn.

⁵ See our [letter](#) to government officials.

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