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French adverts to include health warnings to combat growing obesity

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Food and drink advertisements in France must include a health warning from Thursday in the latest step in a state campaign to combat obesity, a condition which has accelerated among children and lower income groups.

Manufacturers must display one of four messages on broadcast commercials and print and internet adverts or pay a fine of 1.5 per cent of their total advertising budget to a national health fund.

Consumer groups attacked the new law as inadequate. They called for clear and specific warnings on unhealthy food and a ban on adverts aimed at children.

The messages, designed to convey rules for healthy living and similar to warnings in alcohol adverts since 1992, all begin "For your health..." One says "...avoid eating food with too much fat, too much sugar, too much salt." Another says: "...avoid snacking between meals." The other two are "...eat at least five fruits and vegetables a day", and "...undertake regular physical activity."

With its tradition of good food and regular eating habits, France suffers less from obesity than any other European nation except Norway, according to EU statistics. However the authorities have been alarmed by a steep rise in weight in recent years. One third of the country is now overweight by the Body Mass Index standard of 25.

Obesity — a BMI over 30 — has doubled over the past decade to 10 per cent of the population according to INSEE, the national statistics institute. The condition affects one in six children under 15 compared with one in 20 in 1980.

The Ministry of Health found in a survey that up to 98 per cent of the French approved of the new advertising messages, which must appear at the bottom of television screens and advertising displays or be spoken on the radio. However the campaign was denounced as a "joke" by UFC-Que Choisir, the main consumer association.

To test the effectiveness of the warnings, it showed 701 people a television advert, including the message, for a popular chocolate-coated breakfast cereal. Nine out of ten did not make a link between the warnings and the nutritional imbalance of the cereal, said UFC.

Those who were least able to understand the message were children and less educated people. "These are precisely those who are supposedly targeted by the message, so we conclude that the health message misses its goal," said UFC.

Patrick Serog, a nutritionist and author, said that the Health Ministry's intentions were good but the messages were confusing. "When a commercial for a sugary product shows the message saying that you should not eat sugar, that suggests that the product does not contain sugar. It's ambiguous and the food industry will play on that ambiguity," he told The Times.

At the same time as introducing the food warning, which was voted by Parliament in 2004, the Health Ministry has just received commitments from McDonald's and four big food groups on

improving the nutritional quality of their products in France. Coca Cola has undertaken to reduce its sugar level in drinks by 15 per cent; Danone undertook to stop putting sugar in its Taillefine (Slimwaist) yoghurts. McDonald's France is promoting sports, reducing fatty acids in its frying oil and cutting salt in its children's menus by 30 percent.

Over the past two years, anti-obesity action has also been taken in schools, with better canteen food and the removal of snack and soda vending machines.