

French food ads carry health warnings

Updated Fri. Mar. 2 2007 7:39 AM ET

Associated Press

PARIS -- Less fat, less sugar, less salt: Even the mostly svelte French are cracking down. Beginning Thursday, the government ordered food ads to carry cautions telling the French to stop snacking, exercise and eat more fruits and vegetables.

With processed snacks and fast food encroaching on France's tables and culinary traditions, health officials fear the nation's youth face a growing risk of obesity.

This from a nation where just slightly more than 9 per cent of the 63.4 million citizens are obese and fewer than a third are overweight, according to government figures. In the United States, by comparison, one-third of adults are obese, about two-thirds are overweight. Several Mediterranean and Eastern European countries have similar statistics.

The ad restrictions fly in the face of the image of the trim and cuisine-conscious French, perpetuated by books like Mireille Guiliano's best seller "French Women Don't Get Fat." The book argues that the French can eat croissants and foie gras without ballooning because they take time to savor flavors and eat judiciously.

But the growth of processed snacks and ready-made meals with high fat, salt and sugar are changing that image.

And France and the World Health Organization are particularly worried about an obesity epidemic striking the young and bringing future health risks with it, such as diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease. WHO warns that 20 per cent of children across Europe are overweight, their ranks swelling by 400,000 a year.

Other European countries have already taken measures along the lines of France.

Sweden and Norway forbid broadcast advertising aimed at children. Ireland imposed a ban on TV ads for candy and fast food and prohibits using celebrities and sports stars to promote junk food to kids. And Britain has adopted nutritional guidance for food packages.

France's new health guidance affects advertisements on television, radio and billboards and the Internet for processed, sweetened or salted food and drinks. The Health Ministry, which designed the measure, says it will help children "guide themselves" in making eating decisions.

Advertisers who refuse to run the messages will be fined 1.5 per cent of the cost of the ad, to be paid to the National Institute for Health Education. They currently have a choice of four warnings,

which Health Minister Xavier Bertrand said would be regularly updated to keep them effective:

"For your health, eat at least five fruits and vegetables a day."

"For your health, undertake regular physical activity."

"For your health, avoid eating too much fat, too much sugar, too much salt."

"For your health, avoid snacking between meals."

The messages could already be seen Thursday. A Coke ad seen on a billboard carried the message about eating fruits and vegetables.

Some French consumers welcomed the move, while others said they weren't enough.

"The (food) companies should stop putting whatever they want in their products," said Fatiah Ghorab, shopping in central Paris on Thursday. "If the companies don't make an effort," the government's measures accomplish nothing, she said.

France's National Association of Food Industries has advised its members to affix the health messages "to show that the industry prefers information and education measures."

Some consumer groups have already criticized the new advertising effort, saying the health messages will only have a tiny impact and that consumers will ignore them after a couple of weeks.

The UFC-Que Choisir consumer group tested the impact of a similar effort in a study of 700 people and it showed that half failed to notice the message.