Copenhagen, 4 November 2016 - For the first time, researchers and health experts have undertaken a comprehensive analysis of the concerning situation in the WHO European Region of digital marketing to children of foods high in fats, salt and sugars. The findings are published in a new report from the WHO Regional Office for Europe, *Tackling food marketing to children in a digital world: trans-disciplinary perspectives*, which calls for immediate action by policy-makers to recognize and address the growing issue of marketing targeted to children via digital media.

"Our governments have given the prevention of childhood obesity the highest political priority. Nevertheless, we consistently find that children – our most vulnerable group – are exposed to countless numbers of hidden digital marketing techniques promoting foods high in fat, sugar and salt," said Dr ZsuzsannaÂÂ Jakab, WHO Regional Director for Europe. "Parents might be unaware of or underestimate the harmful impact of digital marketing, but this report makes clear the effect of such marketing on our children. It is the responsibility of policy-makers to recognize the new threat presented by digital marketing of food to children and to act swiftly."

In the absence of effective regulation of digital media in many countries, children are increasingly exposed to persuasive, individually tailored marketing techniques through, for example, social media sites and "advergames". This trend persists, although stubbornly high rates of childhood obesity are found almost throughout the WHO European Region.

Sophisticated techniques target children

Food marketing has been identified by the scientific community as an important contributor to the "obesogenic" environment, in which foods high in fats, salt and sugars are promoted extensively, are more visible and are cheaper and easier to obtain than healthy options. Food marketing has been shown consistently to influence children's food preferences and choices, shape their dietary habits and increase their risk for becoming obese.

Digital marketing offers a loophole for marketers, as there is currently little or no effective regulation and minimal control. ÂÂ Furthermore, as online adverts can be tailored to specific audiences, online marketing is potentially much more powerful than other forms, as it is targeted to individual children and their social networks. Often, parents do not see the same advertisements, nor do they observe the online activities of their children; many therefore underestimate the scale of the problem.

Using sophisticated techniques, digital platforms are able to collect extensive personal data from Internet users in order to deliver behavioural advertising, targeting audiences with precision. For example:

- Geo-location data from mobile devices enables marketers to deliver ads and special offers in real time when users are in an area in which specific products are sold, encouraging them to “walk in and buy”.
- Some food chains partner with gaming companies in order to, for example, make the chain’s restaurants important game locations.
- Digital marketing can be pursued via numerous platforms, such as advergames, social media and animated movies, or through powerful peer influencers such as video bloggers, known as “vloggers”.

Digital marketing can engage children in emotional, entertaining experiences and encourage them to share these experiences with their friends – a dubious cocktail when used to promote unhealthy foods.

Steps for effective policy-making

The continuing lack of effective regulation of digital marketing threatens the efforts of policy-makers to halt the growing childhood obesity epidemic. “More than 60% of children who are overweight before puberty will be overweight in early adulthood, and an estimated 25% of school-aged children in Europe are already overweight or obese. This predicts a grim future, as we know that overweight and obesity are key contributing factors to cardiovascular disease, cancer and diabetes,” said Dr Gauden Galea, Director of the Division of Noncommunicable Diseases and Promoting Health through the Life-course at WHO/Europe. “Allowing advertisers and the food industry to market products high in salt, fats and sugars to children through digital platforms with inadequate regulation can have huge health and economic consequences.”

A core policy recommendation of WHO is to reduce children’s exposure to all forms of marketing for foods high in fats, salt and sugars, including via digital media. A balance should be found, in which the clear benefits of participating in online activities are underpinned by strong protection against harm to health, intrusion on privacy and economic exploitation. WHO/Europe encourages governments in the Region to acknowledge their duty to protect children online through statutory regulation that extends the protection they offer children offline to online areas, clearly defining the age range to which protection applies and the types of marketing covered.