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## **Fear-based public service ads help to convince teens to cut back on soda and sugary drinks**

PHILADELPHIA – To reduce obesity, cities across the United States have created public service ad campaigns to persuade teenagers to cut back on sugary drinks like soda. But do the ads work?

A new study published in the [Journal of Health Communication](#) is the first to test the effect of persuasive strategies used in public service ad campaigns aimed at sugar-sweetened beverages, which include non-diet soda, sports and energy drinks, sweetened teas and fruit drinks.

The researchers found that public service advertisements (PSAs) appealing to fear – and warning of the health consequences of too much sugar, such as obesity, diabetes, amputations, cancer and heart disease – had the greatest effect on teens’ intention to cut back on sugary drinks. The study also examined ads that appealed to humor and to nurturance (protective, parental instincts).

“We wanted to find out what types of persuasive strategies worked with PSAs designed to reduce the amount of sugary beverages that teenagers drink,” said lead author [Amy Bleakley](#), a senior research scientist at the [Annenberg Public Policy Center](#) of the University of Pennsylvania who conducted the study with other Penn researchers. “With the ads we tested, fear-based messages produced a significantly higher intention among teens to cut back on sugary drinks.”

The fear-based ads worked directly to influence the adolescents’ intentions, as well as indirectly by affecting the perceived strength of the message. All three kinds of emotional appeals – fear, humor and nurturance – affected other emotions and cognitions as well, but not all of those were shown to be related to teens’ intention to cut back on sugary drinks.

Researchers used an experimental design to examine the effects of six ads – two each using humor, fear, or nurturance – as well as control ads on a national sample of 805 13- to 17-year-olds in 2012. The adolescents were divided into four groups. Each group saw ads using a different emotional approach or the control ads. The teens then were questioned about their intention to cut back, an approach which the study said is used as a consistent and effective proxy for behavior.

### **Tobacco, drugs, drinking and driving – and sugary drinks**

In 2010 the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [funded an initiative](#) to address obesity and tobacco use, the leading preventable causes of morbidity and mortality in the United States. More than 50 communities received funding, and many of them created PSAs about the harmful effects of sugary beverages.

The PSAs on sugar-sweetened beverages follow prior PSA campaigns against tobacco, drugs and drinking and driving. While those other campaigns had been studied, this study said, “It is unknown how health messages about a widely accepted and advertised product will be perceived by teen audiences.”

The current study used PSAs that ran from 2010 to 2012 and were created by the Cook County Department of Public Health, in Illinois; Reach Health Communities Initiative, Indiana; the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, New York; Multnomah County Health Department, Oregon; and King County, in Washington.

The study noted that some of the PSAs may have been better suited to a general audience and others to adolescents.

The study, funded by the [Healthy Eating Research](#) program at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, concluded that PSAs about sugary drinks represent “a new but potentially powerful way to produce behavioral change and impact the obesity epidemic among children and adolescents.” To read or download the study click [here](#).

In addition to Bleakley, the researchers included Amy B. Jordan and Michael Hennessy of the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC) of the University of Pennsylvania; Karen Glanz and Andrew Strasser of the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania; and Sarah Vaala, formerly with APPC and now at the Vanderbilt University School of Nursing.

[The Annenberg Public Policy Center](#) was established in 1994 to educate the public and policy makers about the media’s role in advancing public understanding of political and health issues at the local, state and federal levels.

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