

# Strategic

Promoting healthy  
food and activity

**Alliance**  
environments

*action brief*

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## Media Strategies to Promote Healthy Eating and Activity Environments

Through entertainment and news reports, the media has great potential to shape people's perceptions of nutrition and physical activity issues. The media can be harmful when it presents inaccurate or misleading messages. A one-sided portrayal of the obesity epidemic as simply a matter of personal behavior or genetics limits the range of solutions to individual responsibilities. On the other hand, the media can also be helpful as an advocacy tool. Popular characters in movies or TV that model healthy behaviors can have a positive influence on social norms; stories that feature characters grappling with issues such as diabetes can highlight the challenges the person faces when trying to make healthy choices. News agencies can ensure that stories related to obesity, nutrition and physical activity include an environmental and policy perspective and not just highlight individual responsibility. Media can also shift the focus away from obesity and weight loss towards healthier eating and activity.

In a review of media stories on childhood nutrition, nearly half made no recommendation or recommended only individual behavior change to improve children's eating habits. There is an opportunity for media to draw attention to the need for policies that address issues of public concern such as extensive fast food marketing to youth, the quality of foods served in schools, poor community design, lack of access to affordable fresh fruits and vegetables or un-enforced requirements for physical activity in schools. Public Health and other advocates can harness the power of the media to advance public policy by working with media to explore and expose the impact of the built and social environment on the public's health.

### **Play a role in shaping how media covers these issues by emphasizing:**

- The environment around us is a major determinant of our health and well-being; messages alone are not enough to motivate people to make healthier choices.
- Major public health successes (e.g., tobacco control, child-restraint laws) required multiple strategies, including media advocacy, education and environmental and policy changes.

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STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS: The California Adolescent Nutrition and Fitness Program (CANFit) ■ California Center for Public Health Advocacy ■ California Food Policy Advocates ■ California Pan Ethnic Health Network ■ California Project LEAN ■ California WIC Association ■ Child Care Food Program Roundtable ■ Latino Health Access ■ Prevention Institute ■ Samuels & Associates, Inc

- Personal responsibility is only one aspect of healthy lifestyles; it is also society's responsibility to make it easier for people to eat right and be physically active.
- Government has a strong leadership role to play in setting policies that make it easier for people to make healthy choices.

## Tools for Media Outreach

### Letters to the Editor

A letter to the editor can be the simplest and fastest way to get your message across in the media. Your chances of getting published are better in local papers. The best letters are short (200 words maximum) and make one point very well. Be sure to tie your letter to a recently published story and refer to it specifically. Also, give any affiliation that might improve your credibility.

### Phone Calls

Calling in during a talk show on a relevant topic is another quick and easy way to get your point across and provide a different perspective. Be sure to be brief, clear, and speak with authority. And always thank the host for covering the topic and for taking your call.

### Op-eds

Writing an opinion piece offers an excellent opportunity to present an extended argument in greater detail. Typically, op-eds are timely and are written by community members. It's best to find out the guidelines for the particular newspaper; most will specify a desired length. Most op-eds are about 600-800 words, make three good points about one topic, and have a local angle.

### Press Releases

Many reporters gather information for stories from press releases. There are different kinds of press releases, for example, to announce study results or launch a new program. Even just your organization's reaction to another news item (such as a major research report) is a legitimate news release purpose. They should follow a standard format.

### TV Shows

Contact producers of television shows to praise excellent story lines that highlight environmental issues, to suggest topics to incorporate into storylines, or to critique shows that promote inactivity and poor eating habits.

### Interviews

You may be able to establish yourself as an expert and be called upon to give an interview, either for broadcast journalism or for print. You can also pitch yourself to be interviewed for a specific purpose, such as a victory over junk foods in your local school. The most important tips for interviews are to speak comfortably and with authority. Also, have just two or three simple and clear messages that you want to convey and make your points quickly.

*For a list of citations, please visit [www.eatbettermovemore.org](http://www.eatbettermovemore.org)*