

[Ovaltine: Marketing & Nutrition](#)

Discussion published by Marley Beach on Thursday, September 12, 2019

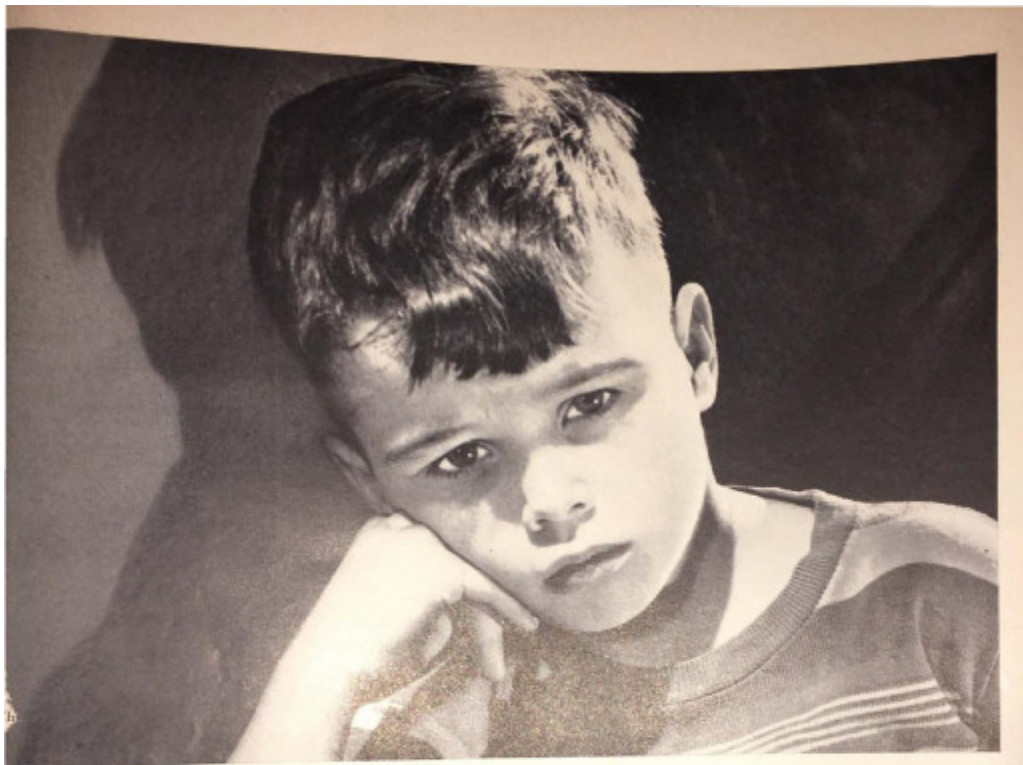
Author: Marley Beach

H-Nutrition Series: Figures

Commissioning Editors: Kristen Ann Ehrenberger and Nina Holmes

In the context of Western medicine, the history of nutrition has documented the attempted manipulation of diet and nutrition to optimize the health of the body, in addition to preventing or treating ailments. The above image represents a turning point in the early days of modern nutrition science, when the dissemination of nutrition information to the public began to extend beyond the experts and became, in the hands of advertisers, a marketing tactic. While physicians dedicate themselves to years of learning and healing, advertisers have no such obligations (Jonsen 481). During the twentieth century, companies began marketing not only to promote their products to those who needed them but to create that need by manipulating consumers—and nutrition did not escape the phenomenon.

[figures-ovaltine-page-001.jpg](#)



How can a mother help a child who is falling behind?

IF HE'S THIN AND NERVOUS—HERE'S SOMETHING YOU CAN DO—BEGINNING TODAY!

When a child is frail and nervous or underweight, it may be due to a number of things. But one of the most common causes is faulty nutrition. And the cause is one which you, the mother, can do something about.

In situations like this, many mothers are now turning to Ovaltine. For Ovaltine, mixed with milk, is a rich supplementary food—a protecting food that fills in the gaps, the thins, and the weak spots of an otherwise "good" diet. It complements, in addition to essential high-quality proteins, and quick-energy foods, the important vitamins A, B₁, C, D, G, Niacin, and the valuable minerals Iron, Calcium and Phosphorus.

Mothers must also bear in mind that a child needs Ovaltine about 2 to 3 times as much protein, iron, vitamins B₁, C and Niacin as an adult. That's another reason for a supplementary food like Ovaltine—to give the under par child the extra amounts of the protecting things he needs.

It is also important to know that Ovaltine is specially processed to make it very easy to digest. A child with a "delicate" stomach will usually digest and absorb Ovaltine very readily. Ovaltine even makes milk more easy to digest.

So when you give 2 to 3 glasses of Ovaltine in addition to everyday meals, you can be certain that you have done just about everything you can do to improve your child's nutrition.

A New Flavor

Ovaltine is available in plain and in an improved, sweet, chocolate flavor which children really like. So, why not give your child Ovaltine every day for 30 or 60 days and carefully note the results.

FOR ADULTS—Ovaltine is also widely used by adults, as a protective supplementary food to guard against deficiencies in the diet.

OVALTINE
THE PROTECTING SUPPLEMENTARY FOOD-DRINK

READ WHAT FOOD-VALUES YOU GET IN OVALTINE MIXED WITH MILK

HIGH-QUALITY PROTEIN—essential in building body and nerve cells.

HIGH-ENERGY FOOD—needed for keen vitality.

IRON—necessary to maintain good red blood.

VITAMIN B₁—required for good appetite, digestion and healthy nerves.

VITAMIN C—necessary for healthy gums and all connective tissue throughout the body.

VITAMIN D, CALCIUM & PHOSPHORUS—all needed for straight, strong bones, good teeth.

VITAMIN A—a deficiency prevents normal growth—often vision—may cause night blindness.

NIACIN—for normal functioning of nervous system and digestive tract.

VITAMIN G (Riboflavin)—essential to normal growth—and health of eyes and skin.

Ovaltine, a malted beverage which was hugely popular throughout the twentieth century, is a perfect example of this marketing strategy.¹ I came across this advertisement while going through recipe scrapbooks that appeared to be from the United States during the forties and fifties which were constructed from magazine clippings. Some of the pages, such as this, had been stuck inside for later pasting. The ailments which Ovaltine is said to eliminate, such as being "frail, nervous or underweight," are ascribed to "faulty nutrition." The treatment suggested by the

Citation: Marley Beach. *Ovaltine: Marketing & Nutrition*. H-Nutrition. 09-12-2019.

<https://networks.h-net.org/node/134048/discussions/4452298/ovaltine-marketing-nutrition>

Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.

advertisement, feeding your children Ovaltine two to three times a day for thirty to sixty days, will supposedly "guard against deficiencies in the diet."

Though medicine and our knowledge of the human body have improved substantially in the past seventy or eighty years, even contemporaneous literature offered several other potential causes for these symptoms—such as anxiety, allergies, hyperthyroidism, infection, parasites, etcetera (Lyons 1949; Randolph 1947; Kuitunen-Ekaum 1940). A trained professional would be much better equipped than the average parent to recognize and diagnose these symptoms correctly. Poor nutrition, however, became the scapegoat for many symptoms following the U.S. National Nutritional Conference for Defense called by President Roosevelt in 1941. These guidelines were produced as a result of a new theory in nutritional science which held that there was widespread malnutrition in the United States—it was merely "latent," the first stage before symptoms developed (Levenstein 67). The nutrients which Ovaltine advertised included protein, energy (calories), niacin, phosphorus, calcium and vitamins B1 and D, which are a near-perfect match for the first set of Recommended Dietary Allowances, issued by the Food and Nutrition Board of the National Research Council in 1941 (NRC 1941).

Advertisements such as Ovaltine's, however, encouraged parents to identify and treat symptoms without a doctor's diagnosis, with the help of their product. Dr. Jessica Mundy suggests that "[p]opular culture appropriates nutritional data and addresses the question [what should I eat?] as often as scientific disciplines and governmental policy" (274). The danger of this appropriation lies not only in the misinformation perpetuated, but preying on the fears of consumers for profit. The government nutrition scientists released statements warning of a widespread, asymptomatic nutritional deficiency which could be lurking within every American (Levenstein 65). The melancholic image of a suffering child encouraged parents to do anything they could to prevent their own child from deteriorating to that point, especially if it was as easy and tasty a solution as a malted chocolate beverage.²

Ovaltine was remarkably successful with this marketing strategy during the twentieth century. In addition to their numerous print advertisements, the company sponsored popular television shows such as *Little Orphan Annie*, offering purchase incentives and prizes to viewers. They also produced the radio program *Ovaltine's Concert Party* sporadically during the first half of the century and created the "League of Ovaltineys", a club which offered membership, badges, contests and activities to young Ovaltine enthusiasts (Lindenmeyer 149). A testament to the success of Ovaltine's strategy is the menu of the 1936 Olympic Games—Germany, Greece, Poland, Switzerland and the United States all requested Ovaltine as part of their special diet, some specifying "at all meals" (Pelly et al. 324).

While Ovaltine does include some nutritional enhancements—such as malt extract and egg (depending on the country and year)—they also misrepresented the value of their product. As can be seen in this advertisement, they frequently included the nutritional benefits of the milk Ovaltine was meant to be mixed with, rather than the sole benefits of their product. The company has continued this strategy, to some extent, up until the 21st century. In 2018, Ovaltine was compelled to change their Australian packaging, as it advertised a 4.5-star rating according to the "government's voluntary health star rating system" (Choice 13). The rating was based, however, on three teaspoons of Ovaltine mixed with skim milk—without the latter, Ovaltine only rated a 1.5-star. Though the rating system was not compulsory, and the company removed the rating

when confronted, the incident demonstrates the continued misrepresentation of the product. At the time of this advertisement's creation, the FDA was encouraging the fortification of food products, so that by 1942, 75% of white bread in the United States was fortified with many of the same nutrients as Ovaltine: iron, thiamin (B1), niacin, riboflavin (B12), folic acid and sometimes calcium (Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Use of Dietary Reference Intakes in Nutrition Labeling, 2003). Without the nutritional benefits provided by the milk medium, Ovaltine was not substantially more healthy or "defensive" than a piece of toast.

The Ovaltine advertisement is a window into an important intersection of nutrition and marketing. Though a doctor should, in the words of Dr. Albert R. Jonsen "not create needs and, in fact, should abhor the creation of needs for service, many others do not have the same ethical constraints when it comes to dispensing health advice, and prey on consumer's fears" (482). The phenomenon of needs-creation marketing, combined with the influence of Ovaltine's wildly successful branding, set a precedent for the advertisements we see today.

Notes

1. "Malted" refers to the addition of malt extract, produced by grains which have been allowed to germinate, and then dried. Its primary use is in brewing but is also present in products like Maltesers and malt vinegar, as well as in malted beverages such as Ovaltine.
2. Ovaltine was not alone in this marketing strategy, especially during the first half of the twentieth century. Numerous food companies utilized fear, particularly the fear of poor nutrition and weakened immunity, as a method of persuading consumers (mothers) of the necessity of their product. Some examples of companies who utilized health and nutrition "scare tactics" include Sunkist, Cream of Wheat, Nestlé, Campbell's, and Heinz (see Parkin 195-197 and Hill 80-82).

Works Cited

"Another Health Star Win." *Choice* (May 2018). Australian Consumers' Association: 13.

Hill, Daniel Delis. *Advertising to the American Woman, 1900-1999*. Ohio State University Press, 2002.

Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Use of Dietary Reference Intakes in Nutrition Labeling. "Overview of Food Fortification in the United States and Canada." *Dietary Reference Intakes: Guiding Principles for Nutrition Labeling and Fortification*. Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 2003. 3. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK208880

Jonsen, Albert R. "Ethics Remain at the Heart of Medicine-Physicians and Entrepreneurship." *The Western Journal of Medicine* vol. 144, no.4, 1986, pp.480-483.

Kuitunen-Ekbaum, E. "Intestinal Parasites in Children in Toronto." *The American Journal of*

Diseases of Children vol. 60, no.3,1940, pp.518-525.
DOI:10.1001/archpedi.1940.02000030050004.

Levenstein, Harvey. *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America*. University of California Press, 2003.

Lindenmeyer, Kriste. "Meet the Parents: Embracing an Ideal of Modern American Childhood." *Rebels Without a Cause? Renegotiating the American 1950s*, ed. Gerd Hurm and Ann Marie Fallon, New York: Peter Lang, 2007,143-155.

Lyons, J H. "Treatment of Hyperthyroidism in Children." *Annals of Surgery* vol. 129, no.5, 1949, pp.631-8. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17859345.

Mundy, Jessica. "Nutrition, Health, and Food: 'What Should I Eat?'" *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Food and Popular Culture*, edited by Kathleen LeBesco and Peter Naccarato. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, 274-285. DOI:10.5040/9781474296250.0029.

National Research Council. *Recommended Dietary Allowances*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 1941. <https://doi.org/10.17226/13286>.

Parkin, Katherine J. *Food Is Love: Food Advertising and Gender Roles in Modern America*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006.

Pelly, Fiona E Helen T O'Connor, Gareth S Denyer, and Ian D Caterson, "Evolution of food provision to athletes at the summer Olympic Games." *Nutrition Reviews* vol 69, no.6, 2001, pp.321-332. DOI: 10.1111/j.1753-4887.2011.00396.

Randolph, Theron G. "Allergy as a causative factor of fatigue, irritability, and behavior problems of children." *The Journal of Pediatrics*, vol 31, no.5, 1947, 560-572. DOI:10.1016/S0022-3476(47)80145-3