

Improving the Health of the Nation - Obesity Obesity Health Alliance Briefing

The Obesity Health Alliance is a coalition of over 40 leading charities, medical royal colleges and campaign groups working together to share their expertise and support the Government in tackling the complex issue of overweight and obesity in the UK.

Obesity: what is the problem?

Obesity and overweight has become the norm in our society. Living with obesity can increase the risk of serious health conditions, such as type 2 diabetes, cancer, cardiovascular and liver diseases, as well as associated mental health problems.

- 67% of men and 60% of women in England have a weight classed as overweight or obese.¹
- More than one in five children have a weight classified as overweight or obese when they start primary school. This rises to more than one in three by the time they leave primary school.²
- Children and adults from more deprived backgrounds are significantly more likely to have obesity than those from more affluent backgrounds. This is an issue of equality.
- The NHS spends more than £5 billion a year treating obesity related conditions, and indirect costs to the wider economy amount to £27 billion due to lost productivity, unemployment and social welfare. Addressing obesity today will save money tomorrow.³
- Obesity is a complex issue with many causes, including genetics, but one of the biggest influences is the world we live in. The Government can play a key role in helping to shape an environment that makes it easier for everyone to be healthy.

What do we want to see?

The COVID-19 pandemic and likely increased risk of worse outcomes for people with obesity has thrown into sharp focus the urgent need to address the health of our population, both ahead of a possible second wave and in the long-term to build future resilience to disease of all kinds.

- The Government should immediately introduce the comprehensive policies outlined in chapters 1,2 and 3 of their Childhood Obesity Plan. These policies are based on strong evidence and will help shape a healthier food environment for both children and adults.
 - Create healthier retail environments by removing multi-buy and location-based promotions of high fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) food and drinks in all kinds of retail outlets.

¹ NHS Digital (2019). Health Survey for England.

² NHS Digital (2019). National Childhood Measurement Programme.

³ McKinsey Global Institute. 2014. Overcoming Obesity: an initial economic analysis

- Introduce a comprehensive 9pm watershed so only adverts for non-HFSS products can be shown before 9pm. The watershed should apply to all media including TV, radio, online, cinema and digital out of home, with no exemptions.
- Extend the soft drinks industry levy to include sugar-sweetened dairy drinks. To incentivise further reformulation the threshold should be lowered and levy rate increased above inflation.
- Hold the food industry to account for meeting targets to reduce sugar and overall calories from everyday foods.
- Introduce calorie labelling of all food and drinks in all out of home outlets, with full nutritional information available on request, and a full package of support for all outlets to support implementation. Colour coded front of pack labelling should be mandatory on all processed food and drinks for retailers and manufacturers.

Action on obesity has public support:⁴

- 74% of people support a drive from the Government to address obesity and 70% say this should now be more of a priority, upon knowing about the potential link with COVID-19 complications.
- 78% of people support manufacturers reducing sugar from everyday foods.
- 74% of people support not showing adverts for junk food before 9pm on TV and online.
- 72% of people support restrictions on shops promoting unhealthy foods in prominent areas such as checkouts and shop entrances.
- 62% of people support restrictions on promotional offers (e.g. buy-one-get-one free) on unhealthy foods in supermarkets.

The role of government

The environment we live in is flooded with unhealthy food and drinks with endless promotions and marketing for high calorie and sugary food on TV, online, in shops, at bus stops and during sports matches. This ensures that unhealthy food is kept firmly in the spotlight and makes it harder for everyone to be healthy.

With your help, this government could level up the nation's health, turn the tide of rising obesity rates and reduce the health gap between the richest and poorest in our society.

Contact

For more information, please contact Caroline Cerny: Caroline.Cerny@obesityhealthalliance.org.uk

⁴ Savanta ComRes interviewed 2,085 UK adults aged 18+ online from the 22nd to 25th May 2020. Data were weighted to be demographically representative of the UK population by age, gender, region and social grade.