

Implementing the 2020 'Tackling Obesity' Strategy

The Obesity Health Alliance is a coalition of over 40 health organisations including the British Heart Foundation, Cancer Research UK, Diabetes UK and medical royal colleges. We are calling for the Government to bring in policies that create an environment that makes it easier for everyone to be healthy.

Background

- Multiple factors influence the development of obesity, including genetics, psychological and social factors and the wider environment.
- Two-thirds of English adults have a weight that is classed as overweight or obese and over one in three children leave primary school with a weight above the healthy range.¹
- There is a stark inequality in obesity prevalence, with those from the most deprived backgrounds more likely to live with obesity, largely due to the wider drivers of inequality that influence health.
- While at an individual level, having obesity doesn't automatically mean poor health, at a population level it is clear that excess weight brings with it an increased risk of many diseases. These include type-2 diabetes, cancer, heart disease, liver disease and associated mental health conditions.
- The impacts of obesity go far beyond the health sphere. Living with obesity can influence a person's life chances, ability to work and attainment. At a society level the medical costs combined with productivity losses means the wider costs of obesity to the UK is around 3% of its GDP (£60 billion in 2018).²
- Evidence suggests that obesity is associated with more severe forms of Covid-19 and can increase the risk of hospitalisation with the virus. Figures covering England, Wales and Northern Ireland from the Intensive Care National Audit Research Centre suggest that at least two thirds of people who have fallen seriously ill with coronavirus were people with overweight or obesity.³

2020 Tackling Obesity Strategy

This strategy was a significant step forward in the Government's approach to obesity. It specifically recognised that many of the factors that drive obesity are outside of an individual's control and committed to a range of policies that together can help create an environment that better enables people to be healthy.

Evidence is clear that policies that affect everyone in the population are more likely to improve health and narrow inequalities than those that target specific people or require a high level of agency to respond. There is no single policy or approach that will address obesity on its own. It is vital that this strategy must be implemented in full, as a comprehensive package of measures, implemented full and at pace.

¹ NHS Digital (2020). Health Survey England.

² Davies, S.C. Time to Solve Childhood Obesity, Department of Health Social Care 2019.

³ Intensive Care National Audit and Research Centre. ICNARC report on COVID-19 in critical care. 24 Jul 2020. <https://www.icnarc.org/Our-Audit/Audits/Cmp/Reports>.

Overview of commitments and progress

Commitment	Progress
Introduce a 9pm watershed on unhealthy food adverts on TV and consider a total ban online	Restrictions will be brought in by the end of 2022. Government has committed to a 9pm watershed on TV an 'online ban' of unhealthy food and drink adverts but has not published further detail.
End multi-buy promotions and location-based promotions of unhealthy food in retail outlets and online.	Restrictions will apply to foods high in fat, salt and sugar that are associated with child obesity and will be brought in April 2022. Exemptions for SMEs.
Require large food outlets to include calorie information on menus.	Restrictions will be brought in April 2022. Outlets can provide plain menus for those who may find this information triggering.
Expand NHS weight management services	£100 million funding package announced for 2021/2022
Gather views and evidence on our current 'traffic light' label to help people make healthy food choices	Consultation held in 2020.
Consultation on introducing calorie information on alcohol products.	No progress. Consultation expected in summer.
Introduce a new campaign with evidence-based tools and apps with advice on how to lose weight and keep it off	Campaign active in summer 2020 and January 2021. No evaluation available.

Where does the Government need to go further?

Junk food advertising

- A wealth of evidence shows there is a clear link between food advertising and the food children prefer. Advertising influences what food children eat, how much they eat and leads to them 'pestering' parents to buy unhealthy products.
- Children see over 15 billion unhealthy food adverts online alone every year. So, restrictions need to be as comprehensive as possible, with minimal exemptions, to ensure their effectiveness.
 - A 9pm watershed on junk food adverts on TV has the potential to reduce the number of children with obesity by 4.6% and with overweight (including obesity) by 3.6%, equivalent to 40,000 fewer children with obesity and 120,000 fewer children with overweight.⁴
 - A total ban on junk food adverts online could lead to children eating 12.5 billion FEWER calories a year. That's equivalent to 1.2 million doughnuts a week.⁵

⁴ Mytton OT, Boyland E, Adams J, Collins B, O'Connell M, Russell SJ, et al. The potential health impact of restricting less-healthy food and beverage advertising on UK television between 05.30 and 21.00 hours: A modelling study. PLoS Med (2020) 17(10): e1003212.

⁵ Obesity Health Alliance (2021). 'Get in the Bin' The impact of ending junk food adverts online.

- Cancer Research UK analysis shows that over three-quarters (79%) of potential revenue loss from removing all HFSS adverts could be mitigated against by companies advertising their existing healthier products instead of promoting their less healthy ones.⁶
- Extend restrictions to other forms of marketing where children are targeted with junk food advertising, including radio, cinema and outdoor advertising.
- Restrict junk food sponsorship of sports events and teams.
- Remove child friendly brand and equity characters from junk food packaging.

Advertising industry response

- The self-regulation alternative being pitched by the advertising industry will be ineffective as it still focuses on 'targeting' rather than 'exposure' and is reliant on the highly flawed interest-based targeting approach that only applies when children are deemed to be over-represented in the audience compared to adults. Children watch much of the same online content as adults and will continue to be exposed to advertising.
- The self-regulatory approach via the Advertising Standards Agency existing CAP code for digital marketing has been tried and already failed, as the speed with which these bodies are able to work is now far outpaced by the fast-moving algorithmic nature of digital marketing and social media platforms.

Reformulation

- It's clear the voluntary sugar reduction programme will not meet its 20% target when it ends this Autumn. Three quarters of the way through, the average overall sugar reduction across all food categories was just 3%.⁷
- While some categories made good progress (breakfast cereals and yoghurt reached 13%) others such as biscuits, chocolate and sweets made minimal progress.
- This contrasts to the success of the regulatory soft drinks industry levy (SDIL) which has led to average sugar levels in soft drinks falling by 44%.
- At the same time chocolate and confectionery product sales have increased, growing 16% and 7% respectively between 2015 and 2019. This highlights the need for fiscal measures to incentivise food manufacturers to reformulate their products as a next step.

Treatment and support

- The new funding to expand obesity services to provide better access to consistent support is very welcome. However, it's unlikely that it will be enough to guarantee access to all services in all areas with sustained funding needed in the future.
- Addressing obesity can be a lifelong challenge for some individuals and support services need to reflect that ongoing need.

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⁶ Cancer Research UK (2019). Analysis of revenue for ITV1, Channel 4, Channel 5 and Sky One derived from HFSS TV advertising spots in September 2019.

⁷ Public Health England (2020). Sugar reduction: progress report, 2015 to 2019.