



WISH 2015 POLICY BRIEFING

OBESITY AND DIABETES: HOW DO WE TACKLE THE JUNK FOOD PROBLEM?

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The World Health Organization has set targets for no further increase in obesity and diabetes by 2025.¹ Stabilizing the trends of increased obesity and diabetes is the first step in controlling these linked epidemics prior to setting targets for reduction of these diseases. Failing to tackle the problem effectively is costing the global economy over \$2 trillion in costs to health services and lost GDP,² in addition to the hardship and costs to individuals and their families.



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Individual problem or policy issue?

People who eat a diet containing high levels of fats, oils, starches and sugars, and drink sugary beverages – a 'junk food' diet – have an increased risk of obesity; meanwhile, obesity markedly increases the risk of diabetes.

The modern environment is strongly 'obesogenic',³ encouraging us to over-consume rich foods and get too little exercise. Traditional approaches to encourage healthy lifestyles, which rely on individuals to refrain from eating junk food, will not be sufficient to control the joint epidemics of obesity and diabetes, unless supported by strong action at the policy level.⁴

Apparent successes that may be achieved by persuading children to eat better are quickly undermined by persuasive inducements to consume junk food. Soft drink companies sold over \$500 billion-worth of products in 2013, and sales have increased in many regions since then.⁵ Snack food products were worth \$0.37 trillion in worldwide sales.⁶ The advertising budgets for unhealthy foods typically

exceed a government's budget for promoting healthy eating by over a hundred to one.⁷

Social marketing to counter commercial advertising of unhealthy foods and beverages most likely reaches those who are already relatively healthy, better off financially, and better educated, whereas population-wide policy approaches that act directly on the commercial market can positively affect all segments of society. As recently concluded from an authoritative review, "Public regulation and market intervention are the only evidence-based mechanisms to prevent harm caused by the unhealthy commodity industries."⁸

Admittedly, some progress has been made with voluntary codes to restrict advertising of junk food to children, but many such codes are too weak to prevent children's continued exposure to such advertising.^{9,10} The shift to new forms of marketing – such as the use of online social networking or embedded product placement in video games and smartphone apps – easily bypasses current regulations and is beyond

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parental control. Such marketing is a problem we have yet to tackle on a meaningful level. Industry codes that cut all junk food advertising on digital media would be a major step forward.

Public health approaches

Many public health policy measures are cheap to initiate,¹¹ and in the case of fiscal measures such as taxing soft drinks or high-calorie non-essential foods can be used to generate revenue to support public health efforts. France and Hungary have introduced such taxes and other countries and local jurisdictions are considering similar moves.¹² Mexico has introduced a tax of one peso per liter (about eight cents) on soft drinks and an eight percent tax on high-calorie foods such as potato chips, sweets and cereal, in spite of strong opposition from industry.

Countries have also introduced statutory measures to restrict advertising of junk food on TV seen by children; these measures are applied to all food producers

equitably. While Sweden and the province of Quebec, Canada have outright bans on marketing all products to children, the UK and Ireland have brought in bans on junk food marketing on TV programmes targeted at children.¹³ These restrictions have led to a legal definition of what is meant by 'junk food'. A World Health Organization 'nutrient profiling' technical assistance scheme can assist countries that want to follow this approach.¹⁴

The World Obesity Federation (WOF) is supporting an initiative to monitor and report on progress in improving our food environments – The International Network for Food and Obesity / Non-communicable Diseases Research, Monitoring and Action Support (INFORMAS). This network of researchers and professionals is developing the tools to monitor marketing activities, company policies, food availability and government action around the globe.¹⁵ Through this initiative it will be possible to compare progress made by governments and corporations, hold them to account for their actions and identify challenges to achieving the WHO goal to 'halt the rise in diabetes and obesity by 2025'.

Notes

1. Geneva: WHO; 2013. www.who.int/nmh/events/ncd_action_plan/en/
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3. UK Government; 2007. *Tackling obesities: Obesogenic environments. Evidence review.* https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/295681/07-735-obesogenic-environments-review.pdf
4. Gortmaker SL et al. Changing the future of obesity: Science, policy, and action. *The Lancet.* 2011;378(9793):838–47.
5. Reuters; 2014. www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/05/idUSnMKWMx6N2a+1e4+MKW20140205
6. Nielsen; 2014. www.nielsen.com/us/en/press-room/2014/global-snack-food-sales-reach-374-billion-annually.html
7. For example: UK healthy diet promotion £7m, food advertising £743m. (UK Government. *Choosing Health.* 2004)
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9. Galbraith-Emami S, Lobstein T. The impact of initiatives to limit the advertising of food and beverage products to children: a systematic review. *Obesity Reviews.* 2013;14(12):960–74
10. Cairns G, Angus K, Hastings G, Caraher M. Systematic reviews of the evidence on the nature, extent and effects of food marketing to children: A retrospective summary. *Appetite.* 2013;62:209–15.
11. Cecchini M, Sassi F, Lauer JA, Lee YY, Guajardo-Barron V, Chisholm D. Tackling of unhealthy diets, physical inactivity, and obesity: Health effects and cost-effectiveness. *The Lancet.* 2010;376(9754):1775–84.
12. *Taxation of unhealthy foods: Literature update.* London: UK Health Forum, 2014. <http://nhfshare.heartforum.org.uk/RMAssets/LiteratureUpdates/OLCLUAugust2014.pdf>
12. BBC; 2007. *Ban on junk food ads introduced.* <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/7166510.stm>
13. Nishida C; 2013. www.who.int/nutrition/topics/seminar_19Sept2013_GrandaSpain_Nishida_presentation.pdf
14. INFORMAS www.informas.org. See the INFORMAS report on the New Zealand Government's policies at <https://cdn.auckland.ac.nz/assets/fmhs/soph/globalhealth/informas/docs/Full%20Food-EPI%20report1.pdf>

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