

British Heart Foundation Briefing:

Impact of food and diet on obesity: Backbench Business debate

Key points

Obesity continues to be one of the leading preventable causes of illness and death in the UK

- Around 64% of adults in the UK and 27% of children in the UK are living with excess weight or obesity. Living with excess weight or obesity is associated with 1 in 9 heart and circulatory disease deaths in the UK.
- There are an estimated 18,000 heart and circulatory disease deaths attributable to excess weight and obesity every year in the UK – equivalent to around 50 each day.
- It is estimated that excess weight and obesity costs the NHS £19.2 billion each year.

Health impacts relating to poor diet are not spread equally across the UK

- Children from deprived areas in England are more than twice as likely to be living with obesity than their most affluent counterparts.
- Healthy foods are nearly three times more expensive calorie-for-calorie as less healthy foods.
- The poorest fifth of UK households would need to spend 47% of their disposable income on food to meet the cost of the Government recommended healthy diet, compared to 11% for the richest fifth.

The food environment plays a key role in driving obesity and poor health

- Eating too much sugar is a key contributor to obesity, while high salt intake increases the risk of high blood pressure which is associated with half of all heart attacks and strokes. As much as 85% of the salt we consume is already in food when we buy it.
- [BHF-funded research](#) suggests diets high in calories, fat and sugar in childhood can cause damage to blood vessel function, which is known to heighten the risk of early heart attacks and strokes, as early as adolescence.
- It is clear we need bold action to improve our food environment, so that the healthy choice is the easy choice for everyone.

A new levy on salt and sugar could prevent almost 2 million cases of chronic disease

- Government should build on the success of the Soft Drinks Industry Levy (SDIL) and consider a mandatory fiscal measure, such as the wholesale levy on salt and sugar proposed in the National Food Strategy.
- Modelling shows that such a levy could prevent over 1 million cases of cardiovascular disease (CVD) over 25 years and could raise up to £3 billion a year in the UK.
- Public polling shows 68% of the public support an expansion of the SDIL to other less healthy foods if the money raised is used to support initiatives for children's food and health.

Obesity and cardiovascular disease

Obesity is associated with a multitude of conditions including CVD, heart attack and stroke and is both associated with, and a key driver of health inequalities. This not only harms people's health outcomes, but also puts significant strain on the NHS, our workforce and the economy. Around 64% of adults in the UK and around 27% of children are living with excess weight or obesity. Children living with obesity are also five times more likely to become adults living with obesity. There are an estimated 18,000 heart and circulatory disease deaths attributable to excess weight and obesity every year in the UK – equivalent to around 50 each day. This is similar to the proportion of deaths from heart and circulatory diseases attributed to smoking, underlining the huge toll that excess weight and obesity takes on the nation's health and the NHS. It is estimated that excess weight and obesity costs the NHS £19.2 billion each year.

Furthermore, health impacts relating to poor diet are not spread equally across the UK. Eating healthy is not affordable for everyone, with healthy foods being nearly three times more expensive calorie-for-calorie as less healthy foods. The poorest fifth of UK households would need to spend 47% of their disposable income on food to meet the cost of the

Government recommended healthy diet, compared to 11% for the richest fifth. In addition, children from deprived areas in England are more than twice as likely to be living with obesity than their most affluent counterparts. Reducing the risk of developing CVD by addressing risk factors like obesity is therefore crucial to alleviating further strain on the already overstretched NHS. This will also help drive productivity and boost the economy, supporting people to live healthier lives for longer.

The role of the food environment in driving obesity

Many millions are spent each year by multinational food companies to bombard us with adverts for highly processed foods and drinks that are high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS). Junk food advertising drives children's consumption of HFSS products. It is estimated that the introductions of a TV watershed and restricting online junk food adverts will lead to UK children consuming 7.2 billion fewer calories annually and reduce the number of children living with obesity by an estimated 20,000. We welcome the Government's planned implementation of delayed restrictions on junk food advertising on TV and online.

Beyond advertising, at every turn, these foods are often more available and affordable than healthier options. This makes it hard for many poorer households to eat a healthy diet, contributing to high rates of obesity and diet-related ill health across the UK, entrenching health inequalities. Additionally, often without realising it, many of us are eating too much salt, with up to 85% of the salt we eat already in processed, packaged and prepared food when we buy it. This contributes to high rates of high blood pressure, which is associated with around half of all heart attacks and strokes. It is estimated that reducing the UK's average daily salt intake by 40% could result in 135,000 fewer new cases of coronary heart disease by 2035.

Creating a healthier food environment

Previous Governments have made bold promises to address obesity and improve our food environment, but these measures are often watered down, delayed or scrapped altogether. We welcome this Government's commitment to a prevention-first approach, however we need to move away from policies that rely on personal responsibility and commit to implementing the measures we know will work. As the drivers of poor dietary health in the UK include the higher availability, accessibility, and affordability of HFSS products in comparison to healthier ones, to increase everyone's access to a healthy diet, it is critical that the Government implements a comprehensive package of mandatory evidence-based and population-level measures.

This should include, expanding restrictions on TV and online advertising and price promotions on less healthy products to address other aspects of our food environment – such as outdoor and radio advertising, sports sponsorship, and mandatory front-of-pack labelling. Measures aimed at reducing the salt and sugar content of everyday foods are also necessary to improve the healthfulness of UK diets and help to address obesity. Previous governments have implemented a number of voluntary reformulation programmes but, given the lack of incentive for the food industry to engage, these have seen limited success. A bold and comprehensive combination of these measures will begin to break the hold manufacturers have on our diets. As a priority, this Government should:

a) Introduce a levy on salt and sugar

The Government should build on the success of the Soft Drinks Industry Levy (SDIL) – which removed 48,000 tonnes of sugar from soft drinks between 2015 and 2019 in the UK, without harming soft drink sales – and consider a mandatory fiscal measure, such as the wholesale levy on salt and sugar proposed in the National Food Strategy. Modelling shows that such a levy could prevent over 1 million cases of CVD over 25 years and could raise up to £3 billion a year in the UK. This could be used to help families, especially those in more deprived communities, to access a healthier diet. This is supported by the majority of the British public – as polling by the Recipe for Change campaign, of which BHF is a Steering Group member, has found 68% of the public support an expansion of the SDIL to other less healthy foods if the money raised is used to support initiatives for children's food and health.

b) Make "prevention-first" a cross-Government approach

The shift to a prevention-first approach needs to happen across Government departments, not just in health. Departments responsible for finance, planning, food supply, advertising, environment and more, are part of the wider solution. The UK will need bold action to protect future generations from the key risk factors for cardiovascular disease. This can be done by working to encourage a healthier food industry and investing more in children's health. Good

progress has already been made in regard to tobacco, which is another key risk factor for heart and circulatory diseases, and Government should adopt a similar approach across all modifiable risk factors for heart and circulatory diseases.

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