

 This Evidence Brief summarises the findings of an Evidence Check rapid review brokered by the Sax Institute

# How can Australia tackle the obesity epidemic?

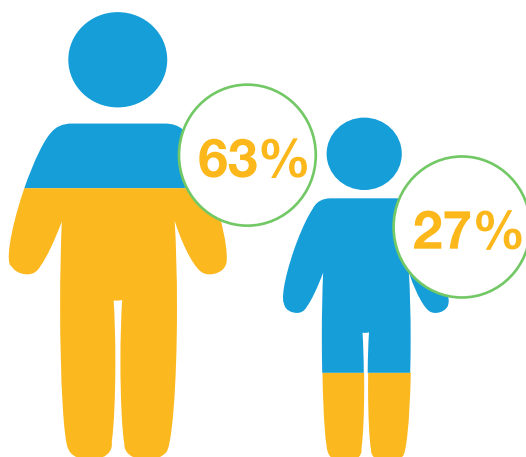
## Summary

- The Queensland Department of Health commissioned a rapid review to look at what population-level strategies are effective in encouraging healthy eating and physical activity to inform the development of a national obesity strategy
- The review found strong evidence for a range of interventions to effectively tackle obesity including public policy responses such as regulations and support for community action and behaviour change initiatives
- Examples of the initiatives found to be effective include: increasing the price of unhealthy food and drinks; reducing the exposure of children to the promotion of unhealthy food and drinks; and workplace interventions to reduce prolonged sitting times and enable physical activity
- Because the causes of obesity are complex, the best way to bring about the greatest change is through a comprehensive strategy drawing on many different approaches.

## What is the issue?

Overweight and obesity rates have increased rapidly in Australia over the last 40 years, with 63% of adults and 27% of children now affected. The causes are complex and influenced by many social and environmental factors, with people of lower socioeconomic status in particular being more likely to be obese compared with other groups. These high rates of obesity have serious health consequences, as the condition is a major risk factor for a range of chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and many cancers. This disease burden impacts people and their families, and has considerable economic consequences.

Figure 1: Overweight and obesity in Australia



In Australia, **63% of adults** and **27% of children** are now considered overweight or obese.<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. A picture of overweight and obesity in Australia 2017. Canberra: AIHW; 2017

## What did the reviewers do?

The Queensland Department of Health commissioned the Sax Institute to broker a review of evidence on strategies to promote healthy weight to inform the development of a national obesity strategy, which aims to address the challenges of obesity in Australia.

Reviewers looked at evidence from 89 studies (systematic reviews and meta-analyses) published from 2016 to mid-2019 that examined the effectiveness of interventions in preventing obesity at the population level, and built on the recommendations of the World Health Organisation Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity (ECHO, 2016).

## What did the review find?

The review found strong evidence to support a wide range of population-level approaches to improve healthy eating and increase physical activity, as well as a broad consensus, nationally and internationally, on what needs to be done.

The review identified a total of 35 interventions to prevent obesity, half of which involved healthy eating, with the rest focusing on physical activity, society and culture, and health systems. Twenty-two of these interventions were shown to be effective (Figure 2), while thirteen were deemed promising.

### Key interventions **shown to be effective:**

- **Healthy eating:** interventions involving public policy, regulation and legislation such as improving food and drink labelling, increasing the price of unhealthy food and drinks, implementing advertising restrictions on unhealthy food and drinks and developing healthy school food and drink policies
- **Physical activity:** improvements to parks and playgrounds, including making them more accessible; and multi-component interventions in schools and workplaces
- **Society and culture:** some mass media campaigns aimed at altering health-related behaviours at the population level; and interventions that offer direct financial incentives for people to lose weight or improve diet / physical activity
- **Health care:** support for breastfeeding; and nutrition guidance in pre- and ante-natal care.

### Key interventions that **show promise:**

- **Healthy eating:** adoption of front-of-pack nutrition warning labels for products high in sodium, saturated fat, added sugar and/or energy content; restriction of temporary price reductions/ promotions on unhealthy food and drink products; and restrictions on unhealthy food and drink marketing
- **Physical activity:** changes to the built environment to improve walkability, cycling and public transport use; and supporting school-based interventions to increase physical activity in children
- **Society and culture:** engaging local communities to lead their own healthy eating and physical activity initiatives; and rolling out a consistent national approach to regularly measure children's height and weight at key stages of schooling.

Figure 2: Selected proven interventions for improving healthy eating and physical activity



For the full list of interventions see the Evidence Check report on the Sax Institute [website](#).

Additional findings:

- Settings-based strategies in places like schools, supermarkets, restaurants or workplaces were found to be effective when they included multiple components such as changes to the environment, building skills and knowledge and behaviour change initiatives
- A comprehensive approach to obesity prevention incorporating a wide range of interventions will build on the relatively small effect likely from each intervention alone
- Interventions that change the environment and involve broad-scale community action are likely to have a positive impact on equity.

## What next?

The review concluded there is high-quality evidence and strong international and national consensus supporting a range of interventions that could contribute to obesity prevention. To address the complex determinants of obesity, a national coordinated approach across different sectors and levels of government is required. The mix of interventions should be considered to ensure positive equity impacts. Comprehensive monitoring and evaluation will also be needed to both track progress and generate further evidence of effectiveness.

The **Population-level strategies to support healthy weight** Evidence Check was brokered by the Sax Institute for the Queensland Department of Health and conducted by:

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## About the Sax Institute

The Sax Institute is an independent, not-for-profit organisation and a national leader in driving the use of research evidence in policies and programs to improve the health and wellbeing of Australians. We have an international reputation as an evidence specialist, and have built up a near two-decade track record of innovation in helping decision-makers analyse and address health policy problems.

## About Evidence Checks



An Evidence Check review is a synthesis, summary and analysis of the best and most relevant research evidence to inform policy making and program development. Evidence Check is used by a range of agencies, including government agencies, non-government organisations, and other policy making agencies.

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